

FAIRIES, FEMINISTS & QUEER ANARCHISTS.

Geographies of squatting in
Brixton, south London

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Abstract

This thesis assembles cultural, historical, political, affective and infrastructural geographies of squatting in Brixton, south London. It does so to *spatialise* the complex material and affective processes through which identities, collectivities and political projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated; to *document* vital spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles which the literature on squatting in England has overlooked; and to critically *interrogate and expand* how squatting in England has been conceptualised. In pursuing these aims, this thesis insists on and demonstrates the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. Where work on squatting in England has largely concentrated on a narrow range of collectives, spaces and time periods and has neglected how squatting has intersected with anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and LGBTQ struggles and politics, this thesis responds to these gaps. Chapters focus on what became known in the 1970s as the Brixton Gay Community, an experiment in communal living and revolutionary politics by gay men; on the Brixton Black Women's Group, a socialist, anti-imperialist feminist organisation active in the 1970s and 1980s; on Queeruption, an anarchist queer festival organised out of a squat in the late 1990s; and on the House of Brag, a queer squatting collective active between 2012 and 2014. I argue that thinking squatting *through* these can profoundly reframe our understandings of squatting. To this end, I have drawn on 24 original interviews as well as on a broad range of archival material. In making important contributions to critical considerations of squatting in England, this thesis draws on and extends a variety of bodies of literature, including geographies of urban sexualities, queer geographies, anarchist geographies, geographies of affect and emotions, as well as geographies of feminist organising in England and social movements more broadly.

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Chapter 1 / Introduction

Whether it is Berlin or Mumbai, London or Nairobi, for most squatters the struggle begins ... with *this* land, this eviction, this neighbourhood, this developer, this idea, these needs.

Alexander Vasudevan (2015a, p. 13)

Urban squatting can be defined as living in – or otherwise using – a building (or part of a building, such as an apartment) without the consent of the owner (Platt, 1980a; Pruijt, 2013; Vasudevan, 2015a). This thesis assembles cultural, historical, political, affective and infrastructural geographies of squatting in Brixton, a district in the south London borough of Lambeth. It does so in order to spatialise the complex material and affective processes through which identities, collectivities and political projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated, thus demonstrating the co-constitution of the spatial and the political; in order to document spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles which the literature on squatting in England has neglected; and in order to expand the theoretical scope through which squatting in England has been considered in both academic and non-academic literature.¹

London's long and rich histories of squatting – not to mention of squatting elsewhere in Britain – have received little sustained attention (Vasudevan, 2017). The following pages dwell on the terms, identifications, connections and tactics mobilised by squatters, on what specific squats have enabled and curtailed, and on the processes of articulation, inclusion and exclusion in the making of particular squatted spaces. Being located in Brixton, I argue, shaped the collectives, projects and spaces explored here in fundamental ways; they, in turn, profoundly shaped Brixton. This is an approach that departs from accounts of squatting – and of activist and autonomous spaces more broadly – which position spaces as simply the grounds in which people have engaged in experiments with communal living, and in which the areas in which these experiments took place appear to have played an incidental role.

'[P]lace', as Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira reminds us, 'is more than a backdrop to our activities', and 'plays an active role in constructing them' (Browne & Ferreira, 2015, p. 2; Nash, 2015). Although squats have long been recognised as offering opportunities for the

¹ I make a distinction between 'academic' and 'non-academic' literature tentatively and contingently. Strict, binary demarcations between 'academic' and 'activist' (or more broadly 'non-academic') work and spaces have long been the subject of very necessary critiques (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Breitbart, 2012). Here, I use this framing as a placeholder, gesturing to complex dynamics and positions in relation to institutionalisation, logics of authority and conditions of knowledge production. Some of these dynamics and positions are explored in Chapter 7.

collective articulation of prefigurative geographies, the exploration of often deeply transformative and explicitly political experiments with communal living, and the building of autonomous infrastructures, the specificities of these experiments, politics and spaces remain largely under-explored in academic literature on squatting in England, as well as on autonomous spaces and practices more broadly (Vasudevan, 2015b; Vasudevan, 2015c; Wall, 2017). The specificities of these experiments, politics and spaces *must* be attended to. The affective, territorial, collective and political dynamics; the processes through which identities, collectivities and projects are assembled – these *must* be spatialised. Place *matters* to how we do politics, and it is imperative that the embodied and political work of creating spaces, of transforming them, of physically defending them be taken into account to. The work of enacting social and political alternatives *cannot be abstracted* from its material geographies – the material limitations embedded in particular places are as crucial as the possibilities they offer.

In addition to the issues I identify, in Chapter 2, with literature on squatting in England, my approach to the collectives, projects and spaces explored in this thesis has been shaped by feminist economic geographer(s) J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2006) work on anticapitalist community economies and initiatives, and on the importance of affect in sustaining these. To clarify: their work, although vital, makes evident the political and epistemological pitfalls of *not* addressing the material, spatial and embodied particulars of such projects. Although they set out to 'directly address embodied, habitual, and emotional practices of being' in these initiatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 152), we are presented by Gibson-Graham with broad, distant accounts which evacuate pressing issues of power, space, precarity and materiality. They do go on to acknowledge that 'the distance we are taking in these overviews makes them appear seamless and unproblematic,' and that '[f]rom this vantage point, we cannot see the close work of stitching (and undoing and restitching) that is the daily ethical practice of building a community economy' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 183); they do not, however, dwell on the consequences of not attending to this work. 'Suffice it to say,' they write, 'that in all these instances, conflict, failure, and discouragement are part of the process of coming into existence' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 183). They then go on to frame such conflicts not in terms of – for example – police repression or infrastructure, but in terms of a lack of can-do feelings. Thus, 'vulnerability' here is due to 'loss of confidence and the waning of commitment of early enthusiasts' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 183). As a result, Gibson-Graham's work veers uncomfortably close to advocating for a thoroughly depoliticised 'positive thinking.' It is hard, for example, to know what to make of their characterisation of a slum dwellers' initiative in

Mumbai. In discussing it, Gibson-Graham celebrate the fact that, ‘against the “tyranny of the emergency” – the poverty and privation that find people living on the street or working for years with no political rights in a foreign country,’ projects such as the slum dwellers’ initiative practice ‘a “politics of patience” and “utility”’ – by, for example, ‘setting aside savings from what is already too little to live on’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxv). Before any consideration is given to precarity, the spaces of the street and the violences of the border, we learn that ‘[p]articulans of authority, domination, and coercion that might neutralize or negate their interventions are examined and *ways to exercise power* are found’ (Gibson-Graham 2006, p.xxv, emphasis in original). Leaving aside for a moment that praising, from their position, ‘patience’ in the face of ‘tyranny’ and ‘emergency’ might be somewhat questionable, there is a startling lack of attention to the fact that what might push back on the creation of noncapitalist economies might be, say, the police, the army and/or local government. Instances of repression are alluded to on occasion – the fascist repression of Basque people is very briefly mentioned in the context of the history of Mondragón, for example. But even then, this is quickly side-stepped. Thus: ‘In any setting we confront difficult circumstances that are potentially generative, if only we can engage them productively. ... [T]he Basque people facing fascist repression of their language and culture were inspired to create a cooperative complex as a way to sustain their communities. ... Starting where they are, these communities are up against many things – *including themselves*. While they do not accord themselves the power to create everything they might desire they refuse to give their opponents the power the destroy everything they create’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.194, emphasis added). Their emphasis on people ‘getting in the way of themselves’ rather than on, say, fascists or specific material conditions getting in the way of these people is deserving of scrutiny.

Also deserving of scrutiny are recent suggestions, in work focusing on squatting in England, that ‘all squatting is inherently political’ as it ‘challenges ownership of property and the authority of the state in allocating housing, and forces confrontation with the state’ (Milligan, 2016, p. 8). Such observations require careful qualification. Indeed, prefigurative projects, challenges to private property, and opposing the state and capitalism are not *in and of themselves* liberatory. Fascists, after all, squat, too, and some have done so as part of virulently racist anti-capitalist and so-called anti-imperialist projects (Cattaneo, 2017; Fominaya, 2020; Serrato, et al., 2017).² Accounts of squatting as an inherently radical practice can obscure more

² Especially in the current context of widespread nationalism and the intensification of border controls – which have resulted in the deaths of countless migrants – ‘any movement claiming the right to be in and reproduce space must’, as David Bell has noted, ‘take into account the politics of race and migration’ (Bell, 2016, p. 510).

than they illuminate. The ‘resonance[s] of squatting’, as Alexander Vasudevan has noted, depend ‘on a constellation of shifting practices ... rather than any single global mode of urban insurgency’ (Vasudevan, 2015c, p. 342). ‘There can’, Vasudevan argues, ‘be no strict homogeneous theory of squatting’ (Vasudevan, 2015c, p. 342) – to the extent that even though the pursuit of housing has been absolutely central to many squatting movements, squatting as a whole can nonetheless not be reduced to being solely or always a struggle for housing.

Existing historical and geographical work on squatting in England has largely concentrated on a narrow range of collectives, squats and time periods (see Chapter 2). This literature has, crucially, long neglected how squatting has intersected with anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and LGBTQ struggles and politics. Here, I focus on these generative intersections. I do so by considering squatting as deployed by collectives who explicitly connected it to such struggles, and who purposefully identified as, for example, Black feminists and/or queers.³ I do not document such spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles only to provide less exclusionary or more comprehensive accounts of squatting – although such corrective accounts are indeed politically and urgently necessary (Hemmings, 2011). I do so also to consider how thinking squatting *through* the collectives, spaces, politics, histories and projects explored here can profoundly reframe our understandings of squatting itself.⁴ Chapters of this thesis centre on what became known in the 1970s as the Brixton Gay Community, an experiment in communal living and revolutionary politics by gay men; on the Brixton Black Women’s Group, a socialist, anti-imperialist feminist organisation active in the 1970s and 1980s; on Queeruption, an anarchist queer festival organised out of a squat in the late 1990s; and on the House of Brag, a queer squatting collective active between 2012 and 2014, of which I was part.

In exploring the range of politics, histories and practices that have animated squatting in Brixton, each chapter in this thesis draws on a variety of literature – from literature on feminist historiography and on affect to literature on infrastructure and on queer anarchism. This capacious conceptual framework enables me to attend to a range of dynamics, practices, spaces and histories which, as detailed in Chapter 2, have been neglected in the literature on

³ ‘There is’, as Clare Hemmings has noted, ‘a certain awkwardness’ in differentiating ‘feminist’, ‘decolonial’ and/or ‘queer’ from each other, ‘particularly in terms of their overlaps’ (Hemmings, 2018, p. 21). But, as will become clear over the following chapters, such differentiations are – contingently – necessary to trace the specific histories, spaces and projects this thesis focuses on. Although they might not be nearly as at odds with each other as one might be led to believe, great care must be taken not to flatten the differences between these terms, politics and struggles.

⁴ It should not be assumed that a concern with anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and LGBTQ issues would *necessarily* focus on people, projects and spaces explicitly identified as such; the field of inquiry for ‘subjectless critiques’ – which might approach or deploy queerness not as an identity marker but as an analytic or way of thinking, for example – is vast (Eng, et al., 2005; Berg, 2014; Berg, 2015).

squatting in England. In assembling this thesis, I have drawn on 24 original interviews. All of the people I interviewed were involved in the collectives, scenes, spaces and events explored in the following chapters. Most of them have been squatters. I also make use of a broad range of material gathered from a number of archives – with the term ‘archive’ used here to refer to institutional, formal depositories of documents, as well as more informal collections of objects, histories and practices (such as films, social media platforms and interviewees’ personal papers). There is, as Susan Pell has noted, ‘a long history of social movements ... archiving their activism by creating their own autonomous archives’, and London’s squatters are among those to have engaged in such archival endeavours (Pell, 2015, p. 34; Cvetkovich, 2003; Eichhorn, 2013; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017). Their labour – largely unfunded and volunteer-run – has been essential for this project. I am especially grateful to the work of everyone involved in the 56a Infoshop archive as well as in the online platforms urban75, past tense and Brixton Buzz, all of which have, for years (and in some cases decades), chronicled Brixton’s histories of squatting, organising and resistance (56a Infoshop, n.d.; Brixton Buzz, 2011; Carter, 2017; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; past tense, n.d.; Pell, 2015; urban75, 1995).

In documenting and studying collectives, projects and spaces in the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2010s, I reject all-too-common teleological, sequential narratives in which complex, fractured political projects are oversimplified and stabilised, by, for example, segmenting them according to clearly demarcated time periods and deeply entrenched assumptions about age and intergenerational dynamics. Such accounts may follow, for example, what Clare Hemmings has described as narratives of ‘loss’ and ‘return’ (Hemmings, 2011, p. 5), which often consider recent political projects, identifications and concerns as failures for having turned away from the causes, politics and theories of a supposedly more radical past (Eichhorn, 2013; Hemmings, 2011; McBean, 2016); or they may follow narratives of ‘progress’ (Hemmings, 2011, p. 3), which position previous generations’ politics as stubbornly static, invariably essentialist and hopelessly outdated, and as having been definitively surpassed by inherently more politically and theoretically astute younger generations (Eichhorn, 2013; Hemmings, 2011; McBean, 2016).⁵ Such narratives do not account, among other things, for the simple fact that people’s politics may change; for the sheer

⁵ Some formulations of queer politics, for example, position feminist and lesbian politics and identifications (especially on the part of middle-aged women) as not only outdated and/or anachronistic, but as invariably essentialist and trans-exclusionary (Ahmed, 2017; Browne & Ferreira, 2015; Eichhorn, 2013; Enke, 2018; Hemmings, 2011; McBean, 2016). Queer is then positioned as the corrective, evolutionary extension of feminism (Jagose, 1996; McBean, 2016). This necessitates that the multiplicitous, contested political positions and histories of feminism and of lesbian identifications be subsumed into a singular, homogeneous narrative. Further, as Sara Ahmed argues, ‘[t]he bits and pieces from lesbian histories that are understood as more redeemable (for example, butch/femme as erotic styles or modes of being) become rewritten as a queer history, or a history of how queerness came to be’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 223).

multiplicity of uses to which seemingly settled terms have been put; or for the fact that being young is no barrier to holding deeply reactionary views. Here, in telling different stories to those commonly told about squatting in England, I also wish to explore the political possibilities that might open up when we tell stories about political projects differently (Hemmings, 2011). Thus, although the chapters of this thesis are arranged chronologically – proceeding from the 1970s to the 2010s – this is so to help the reader track how the complex legal geographies of squatting in England have shifted over the time periods explored here. The histories, spaces, identifications, terms, politics and projects explored in the following pages should not be understood in a linear fashion. I approach them as not settled, transhistorical, impermeable, over or seamlessly aligned with lived experiences; rather, I consider them as valuable resources to denaturalise the past, to imagine other ways to live in the present and to formulate more emancipatory futures (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Browne & Nash, 2010; Eichhorn, 2013; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019).

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapters 2, 3 and 4 establish the theoretical, historical, geographical and methodological contexts of my project. In Chapter 2, I focus first on giving an overview of historical and geographical literature on squatting in England (which connects the chapters of this thesis and which each chapter contributes to in different ways); I then outline how the legal geographies of squatting in England have shifted over time. Chapter 3 outlines the range of material this project draws on and establishes the methodology this thesis deploys. Chapter 4 constructs a geography of Brixton, establishing the contexts and processes in and through which the area became so heavily squatted and remains a terrain of deeply politicised contestation.

Chapter 5 revisits and expands on historian Matt Cook’s ground-breaking work on the Brixton Gay Community (Cook, 2013; Cook, 2014). It spatialises the terms, identifications, connections and exclusions through which the BGC was assembled and negotiated. Specifically, this chapter interrogates some of the ways in which the squatted territory of the Brixton Gay Community (BGC) were implicitly and explicitly demarcated along boundaries of race, gender and sexuality. It argues that some of the BGC squatters understood what being gay meant in ways that were often racialised and centred on whiteness; and that although the BGC was formed in the context of a political project to radically interrogate hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality in the service of creating a more fluid, ‘gender-free’ society, boundaries between specific formulations of ‘gay’ and other gendered and queer identities and positions were, in practice, often rigidly enforced. By dwelling on the dynamics and negotiations constitutive of an experiment in squatting and communal living and in

centering the ways in which gender, race and sexuality operated in a squatted community, this chapter develops the broader arguments of this thesis with regard to the co-constitution of the spatial and the political.

Chapter 6 centers on the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG). Although there have been a number and a variety of engagements with the BBWG, its politics and its work, the group's spaces – and in particular the centrality of squatting to the group – have not been addressed in detail. This chapter documents these spaces, arguing that they had a direct impact on the BBWG's dynamics, work and politics. Squatting presented the group with several challenges and limitations; it also, however, enabled the group to organise autonomously against state violence, and to do so in line with their anti-state, decolonial and feminist politics. The pressures brought about by the BBWG's transition to working in a non-squatted space and with local authority funding – pressures which significantly contributed to the group's demise – make this clear. Crucially, where literature on squatting in England has elided the ways in which squatting has intersected with decolonial struggles (and with the political and theoretical implications of this), this chapter dwells on how we might rethink squatting in light of these, amidst the ongoing violences of colonialism. Finally, this chapter also contributes to a nascent literature on the ways in which squatting provided the infrastructure for much feminist organising in London; in focusing on a socialist, anti-imperialist feminist organisation which explicitly rejected radical feminist politics, however, it dwells on squatted feminist spaces fundamentally different to those explored in the literature thus far.

Chapter 7 builds a social and cultural geography of the anarcho-queer collective AnarQuist, of the squatted 121 Centre and of the first-ever Queeruption gathering. This collective and event have not, until now, been documented in academic literature. This chapter explicitly considers the squatted 121 Centre and Queeruption (which took place in the 121 Centre) as sites of spatialised queer theoretical knowledge production. It argues that the members of AnarQuist and the Queeruption organising collective were engaged in generating a localised queer theory – ways of queer thinking and knowing – with different emphases, priorities, dynamics, texts, and lineages to those of queer theory as it is most commonly thought of and located. The 121 – as a building and as a nexus of particular histories of activism and politics – shaped and curtailed this project in particular ways. Crucially, this chapter argues that the spaces of these processes of knowledge production – the 121 Centre, and in particular its location in Brixton – gave rise to and foregrounded particular exclusions for AnarQuist and Queeruption to work through.

Chapter 8 pieces together an affective and infrastructural geography of the House of Brag's fourth (and last) squatted social centre, which took place in Brixton in the summer of 2014. As with AnarQuist and Queeruption, this collective and its spaces and events have not, until now, been documented in academic literature on squatting in England. Further, where geographical work on post-2008 austerity has focused on its large-scale financial repercussions and neglected intimate geographies of austerity, and where accounts of collective organising tend to over-simplify its complexities and the 'banal, messy, faltering ways in which [it] happens' (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, pp. 16-17), this chapter focuses on those intimacies and complexities. It explores the deeply felt stakes of anti-austerity organising, collectivity and resistance; it argues that the material spaces and infrastructures of Brixton and the House of Brag's squatted social were imbricated in affective dynamics which directly shaped what the collective could and could not do, how its members felt, and how they worked together (and fell apart) as a collective. This chapter pursues these aims in order to demonstrate that efforts to think and live social and political alternatives – and the affective dynamics that sustain these efforts – cannot be abstracted from their material geographies or their difficulties.

Throughout the thesis, short asides in the form of text-boxes gesture to spaces, histories, collectives and struggles which I do not engage with in depth (due to the scope and resources available to this project), but which nonetheless provide rich glimpses into the broader contexts in which the collectives, projects, spaces and struggles I *do* focus on operated. This is an approach inspired by the walking tours of Brixton's squatting histories which I have led over the course of my research, and which provides glimpses into the sheer variety of other forms and approaches that stories of squatting in Brixton might take.

Here, I do not seek to tell *the* story of squatting in Brixton, or even of decolonial, feminist and LGBTQ squatting in Brixton. There are no such singular stories to be told. I do not seek to present grand, exhaustive and conclusive narratives of the particular collectives and spaces the following chapters focus on, either. For one, the narratives generously offered by the people I interviewed would likely be formulated differently were I to interview them today. These geographies, then, are offered as particular, partial, and contingent interpretations and representations.⁶

With all of this in mind, over the following chapters, this thesis *spatialises* the complex material and affective processes through which identities, collectivities and political projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated, insisting on and demonstrating the co-constitution of

⁶ I engage with questions of epistemology, reproducibility and methodological rigour as they pertain to this project in depth in Chapter 3.

the spatial and the political; it *documents* vital spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles which the literature on squatting in England has overlooked; and it critically *interrogates and expands* how squatting in England has been conceptualised.

Some notes on terminology

'Activism' / 'activist'

Uses of the terms 'activism' and 'activist' have long been critiqued for the ways in which they can instantiate simplistic binary demarcations between supposedly radical and enlightened 'activists' and purportedly non-politicised or politically inactive people (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Do or Die, 2001; King, 2016). Such binaries can enforce a hierarchical division of labour in which 'activism' is a distinctive task undertaken by experts with specialist knowledge and skills necessary to lead social change, in which the personal and the political are compartmentalised, and in which 'activism' and the reproduction of everyday life are distinct (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Do or Die, 2001; Federici, 2010; King, 2016). The range of everyday ways in which supposedly non-politicised or apathetic people resist oppression and prefigure social and political alternatives are, in these framings, often ignored (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Do or Die, 2001; King, 2016). Sensitive to these critiques, here I only use the terms 'activism' and 'activist' in specific cases. I use them in reference to the rare occasions when people explicitly invoked them to refer to themselves or others and their work, or when referring to academic literature which explicitly deploys these terms and which I draw on in this thesis (for example, literature on emotions and activism). For the most part, I use the term 'organising', as this was the term most of the people I interviewed used (seemingly to emphasise the *collective* and *intentional* aspects of the projects we discussed as being what – tentatively – differentiated them from more quotidian forms of resistance).

'Britain' / 'Great Britain' / 'United Kingdom'

These terms are often used inconsistently, causing great confusion. Here, I use 'Britain' and 'United Kingdom' synonymously, to refer to England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Fisher, 2012; Guardian and Observer style guide, 2015a; Guardian and Observer style guide, 2015b; Wright, 2003). 'Great Britain' is used to denote England, Wales, and Scotland (Fisher, 2012; Guardian and Observer style guide, 2015c; Wright, 2003). When these terms appear in this thesis in direct quotations, however, some ambiguity may remain.

'Queer'

The term 'queer' is a contentious, capacious term which has taken on a number of occasionally overlapping and contradictory meanings (Fikry & Ryan, 2016; Giffney, 2009; Plummer, 2005). In some formulations, 'queer' is used as shorthand for an indeterminate, ever-growing, coalitional array of sexual and gender 'dissidents', including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (Browne, 2006, p. 885; Fikry & Ryan, 2016; Giffney, 2009; Plummer, 2005). This was *one* of the ways in which some in AnarQuist and in the House of Brag used this term, for example. Some of the people I interviewed felt uneasy about queer being used in such ways and about having this term applied to them, however. They felt that it homogenised, misrepresented, invisibilised and/or undermined a broad array of histories, identifications and political projects (such as 'gay' or 'lesbian') which are much more meaningful to them. Thus, here I use the acronym 'LGBTQ' when referring, collectively, to the struggles and people I focus on in this thesis. This acronym is, inevitably, itself contested (what term is not?) (Baedan, 2015). It was, however, preferred by those interviewees who objected to 'queer' as it was felt to more explicitly mark 'lesbian' and 'gay' *as well as* a coalitional approach.

‘Queer’ can also be used strategically and provisionally to denote genders, identities and sexualities that, for various reasons, ‘elude definition’ (Giffney, 2009). I deploy it in this way in Chapter 5, for example, when referring to people who participated in Brixton’s public sex cultures and attended Pearl Alcock’s shebeen, in the absence of their own preferred terms.

‘Queer’ is, further, used to mark a commitment to the radical questioning of normativities and orthodoxies, in part by denaturalising supposedly clear-cut, coherent, stable boundaries between dichotomous categories of identity, sexualities, genders and spaces. For example, ‘queering’ categories such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ or ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ might entail not seeing them as natural, binary, oppositional and/or complementary identities but rather as historically contingent, situated and requiring continuous (re)formation (Browne, 2006; Fikry & Ryan, 2016; Giffney, 2009). ‘Queer’ is thus also used as a kind of *anti-identity* placeholder (Fikry & Ryan, 2016). According to Lee Edelman, for example, ‘queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one’ (Edelman, 2004, p. 17). This was *one* of the ways in which some in AnarQuist and in the House of Brag used this term.

Finally (for our purposes), ‘queer’ is used, along similar lines, to refer to self-consciously oppositional, anti-assimilationist political stances which seek to challenge hegemonic exclusions, normalisations and hierarchisations (Browne, 2006; Fikry & Ryan, 2016; Giffney, 2009). This was one of the ways in which some in AnarQuist and in the House of Brag used this term.

In the chapters that follow, ‘queer’ is necessarily used in all of these ways. I attempt to make clear, in each case, how it is being used.

‘Social centres’

Social centres are, by and large, autonomous, communally-run, not-for-profit spaces to meet for any number of reasons – whether for grassroots political organising, benefit advice sessions, language classes or film screenings (Chatterton, 2010; Dee, 2016; Finchett-Maddock, 2016). In Britain, they largely rely on volunteer labour and operate on a donation, sliding-scale or pay-what-you-can basis (Chatterton, 2010; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006). Many host radical bookshops, libraries and archives, cafés, gig spaces and bike workshops (Dee, 2016; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006). In Britain, social centres appear to be exclusively politically left-wing (although this is not the case everywhere – as Finchett-Maddock notes, since 2000 Italy has seen the establishment of a large number of right-wing social centres) (Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Chatterton, 2010; Dee, 2016; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006). While some may be explicitly anti-capitalist and/or anarchist, others may have more loosely defined leftist politics (Chatterton, 2010). Some social centres operate out of squats; others operate out of rented or bought/owned buildings in order to provide more stable, long-term and secure spaces than squatting can provide (Chatterton, 2010; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006). In some cases, however, the term ‘social centre’ is specifically used to avoid associations with squats, in the hope of attracting ‘a broader audience’ (Chatterton, 2010, p. 1207; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2006).

‘They’/‘their’/‘them’ as singular pronouns

‘They’/‘their’/‘them’ are used as singular pronouns to refer to individuals whose identity does not correspond to conventional binary sex and gender distinctions, and who have specified these as their preferred pronouns (Richards, et al., 2017; Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

Chapter 2 / Squatting in England: A review of the literature and the law

In exploring the range of politics, histories and practices that have animated squatting in Brixton, each substantive chapter in this thesis draws on a variety of bodies of literature. Rather than attempt to provide an overview of all of these here, in this review chapter I give an overview of historical and geographical literature on squatting in England, and outline only the literature on squatting in England each chapter draws on. I detail the broader literature informing each chapter in the chapters themselves. In the second half of this review chapter, I proceed to outline how the legal geographies of squatting in England have shifted over time.

I specify ‘England’ here because laws around squatting vary in the United Kingdom more broadly.¹ Further, although squatting has taken place across the United Kingdom, squatting outside of England – and, to be specific, outside of London – remains largely unexplored (Hinton, 1988). There are only a small handful of brief engagements – from within or outside academia – with squatting in cities such as Brighton, Bristol, Newcastle or Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester (Chatterton, 2002; Grohmann, 2018; Needle Collective & the Bash Street Kids, 2014; Wakefield & Grrrt, 2003 [1995]). Doncaster, Durham, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Scunthorpe and Sheffield, for their part, have received only passing mentions in accounts focused on London (Davis, 2017; Hinton, 1988). Considerations of squatting in Ireland, Scotland and Wales are even rarer (Holligan, 2015; Ward, 2002; Watson, 2016).² These are histories and geographies which demand to be explored in depth, and it is therefore important to be very specific about the geographical scope of the literature so far. Although in this thesis I, too, concentrate on London, I explore (as will become clear) histories,

¹ Laws around squatting in Wales *are* in line with those of England (Wilson, 2017). Under the Trespass (Scotland) Act of 1865, however, it has been a criminal offence for a century and a half to ‘lodge in any premises or encamp on any land [in Scotland] which is private property without the consent or permission of the owner or legal occupier’ (Watkinson, 1980, p. 158; Friend, 1980; Holligan, 2015; Watson, 2016). As will become clear over the course of this chapter, the legal geographies of squatting in England have been – and are – very different. For more on squatting in Scotland, see Don Watson’s *Squatting in Britain, 1945-1955: Housing, Politics and Direct Action* (Watson, 2016). Charlie Johnstone touches briefly on squatting in Glasgow in the mid-1940s, as part of his study of Glasgow council tenants’ struggles for housing in the 1950s and beyond (Johnstone, 2000). The exact legal situation in Ireland is ambiguous (Creed, 2014; Gimson, 1980; Gray, 2015; Housing Advice for Northern Ireland, 2020; McDermott, 2017; nidirect, n.d.; Wilson, 2017). Mark Gimson, however, has noted that as of 1980 squatting had taken place on both sides of the Irish border – with squatting in Northern Ireland most prevalent in Belfast and Derry, and squatting in the Republic of Ireland largely confined to tower blocks in Dublin (Gimson, 1980).

² Anarchist and historian Colin Ward’s now-classic *Cotters and Squatters: Housing’s Hidden History* (2002) is a key exception in its attention not only to some squatter settlements in Wales, but in its attention to *rural* squatter settlements in England and Wales. Attention to squatting in rural areas anywhere in Britain is otherwise negligible. Touching primarily on settlements from the Tudor period to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, Ward’s brief account is structured around local variations on the widespread folk belief that if a house could be erected between sunrise and sunset the occupants had the right to tenure and could not be evicted (a folk belief which, as Ward notes, in some cases *did* lead to the legitimisation of some settlements).

spaces, dynamics, politics and projects which have largely been neglected in both academic and non-academic literature on squatting in England.³

Literature on squatting in England has grown exponentially since late 2012. The passing of Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act of 2012 (LASPOA) – which criminalised squatting in residential buildings in England and Wales – has given renewed urgency to questions around squatting, precarity and resistance under austerity. A range of responses⁴ – from within and outside academia – have emerged in the years since and continue to do so (this project being one of them).⁵ A number of legal scholars have explored the legal, moral and philosophical implications of laws around squatting (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015a; Holligan, 2015; Manjikian, 2013; Prichard, 1981; Watkinson, 1980; Watson, 2016). Scholars in other disciplines have parsed the relationship(s) between squatting and ‘short-life’ housing (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979).⁶ I draw on this work below, in outlining the changing legal geographies of squatting in England; I also draw on it in Chapter 4, in charting changes in local government policies with regard to squatting.

Historical and geographical work on squatting, in spite of the richness and heterogeneity of many aspects of these strands of the literature, has largely concentrated on a narrow range of collectives, squats and time periods. Recent years have seen a growing number of references to the surge in squatting which began in the summer of 1946, when more than 45,000 people – most of them ex-servicemen and their families – squatted empty military camps across Britain; this surge was followed, in early September 1946, by the mass occupation of what would nowadays be termed ‘luxury flats’ in the Kensington, Bloomsbury, Marylebone, Pimlico, Regent’s Park, St. John’s Wood and Victoria areas of London (Burgum,

³ Literature on squatting in England often overlaps – but should not be conflated with – literature on social centres in the UK. As briefly outlined at the end of Chapter 1, social centres are, by and large, autonomous, communally-run, not-for-profit multi-purpose spaces (Chatterton, 2010; Dee, 2016; Finchett-Maddock, 2016). Some social centres operate out of squats; others operate out of rented or bought/owned buildings (Chatterton, 2010; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Hodgkinson & Chatterton, 2006). In some cases, the term ‘social centre’ has been specifically used to signal a break with squatting – for example, out of a desire to be ‘professional-looking’ as opposed to ‘looking like a commune or squat’, and be part of ‘normal society’ rather than attracting the ‘same old crusty types’ (Chatterton, 2010, p. 1217). Very different dynamics play out across this broad range of spaces (particularly with regard to questions of precarity, legality and illegality). Still, due to their intertwined histories, squats and social centres cannot be disentangled. I draw on literature on social centres where relevant, especially when tracking the shifting legal geographies of squatting in England.

⁴ Such responses have included analyses of media and political rhetoric concerning squatters in the years and months preceding the passing of Section 144 of the LASPOA (Brown & Pickerill, 2009a; Dee & Santos, 2015; Manjikian, 2013). Mary Manjikian, for example, has focused on how popular understandings of squatting have changed in England over time. She argues that while squatting has at times been widely considered morally and ethically justified as a means of providing housing for people in need (as in the 1940s), new narratives advance a view of squatting as an existential threat to the state and to ‘citizen security’ (Manjikian, 2013, p. 76).

⁵ Although only one chapter in this thesis (Chapter 8) dwells on squatting in the aftermath of Section 144, it was in the aftermath of its passing that I became involved in London’s squatting community and eventually became a squatter myself; it was in the aftermath of Section 144 that I began to formulate the questions this project explores.

⁶ What is meant by ‘short-life licenses’ is explained in Chapter 4.

2019; Hinton, 1988; Watson, 2016). This growing awareness has, however, primarily taken the form of passing mentions. The work of James Hinton (1988) and the recent work of Don Watson (2016) and Sam Burgum (2019) remain notable due to the rare scope and depth of their engagement with this period.⁷ Historical and geographical work on squatting in England has overwhelmingly focused on the late 1960s and the 1970s, on organisations such as the London Squatters Campaign and the Family Squatting Advisory Service, and on squats in Redbridge, Tolmers Square, Villa Road and at No 144 Piccadilly (Davis, 2017; Milligan, 2016; Wates, 1976; Wates & Wolmar, 1980); further, it has dwelled on the tactics of various squatting campaigns, on responses to squatting by local and central government, and on the extent to which squatters have been driven by a need for housing or by political beliefs (Davis, 2017; Dee, 2014; Reeve, 2005).⁸

These recurring concerns reflect the enduring centrality of Ron Bailey's *The Squatters* (1973) to studies of squatting in England. *The Squatters* is a first-hand account of the London Squatters Campaign (LSC), which is often considered to have kick-started the modern squatters' movement in London and in Britain more broadly (Davis, 2017; Dee, 2014; Kearns, 1979; Needle Collective & the Bash Street Kids, 2014; Reeve, 2009).⁹ Bailey was also involved with the South East London Squatters (SELS), and so took part in the path-breaking

⁷ In a *History Workshop Journal* article, Hinton (1988) outlined the post-war housing context in which the wave of squatting in 1946 took place. He charted the conflicts between squatters and the Labour Government, arguing that previous assessments of this period have underestimated the extent to which the occupations were led or facilitated by members of the Communist Party. More recently, in a book-length study, Watson (2016) charts these movements across Britain from 1945 to 1955 at both the national and local level, along with responses to them by local authorities and central government. He considers this wave of squatting in light not only of the hurdles many people faced in obtaining council housing but also in light of the extensive requisitioning of empty private properties that took place during the Second World War. Recently, Sam Burgum (2019) has revisited the squatters' movement of the 1940s to consider the aftermath of the 2017 Grenfell Tower tragedy, in which – due to years of neglect and cost-cutting on the part of Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation and Kensington and Chelsea Council – a fire killed at least 72 people. In the aftermath of the fire, the then-Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, drew attention to the spatial inequalities surrounding the Grenfell fire and suggested the government might address these through the 'compulsory purchasing or requisitioning' of a 'large number of deliberately kept vacant flats and properties all over London' (Corbyn, quoted in Burgum, 2019). These suggestions were met with dismissal by Theresa May's government (Watts, 2017). Taking a genealogical approach, Burgum turns to the squatters' movement of the 1940s and the responses to it by both the Churchill and Atlee governments in order to unsettle taken-for-granted approaches to property and ownership.

⁸ Rowan Tallis Milligan (2016) has sought to trouble this common binary framing of squatters as *either* 'political squatters' who occupy buildings in order to 'engage in political activism' *or* as 'non-political' 'deprivation squatters' who squat out of sheer necessity (Milligan, 2016, p. 8). Looking back primarily to Tolmers Square, Elgin Avenue and the London Squatters Campaign, Milligan proposes that, 'whether out of need or choice', 'all squatting is inherently political' as, she contends, it 'challenges ownership of property and the authority of the state in allocating housing, and forces confrontation with the state' (Milligan, 2016, p. 8). Although Milligan's troubling of a reductive binary is very welcome, it is worth exploring whether her reframing essentialises the act of squatting in another manner, and obscures some important contexts, dynamics and differences in the ways in which it has been and can be carried out. There are, for example, situations in which property owners squat while renting out their property and living off the profits, or situations in which people who squat a place then charge rent to others who move in after them (Goymour, 2015). Further, as noted in Chapter 1, some squats have been occupied as part of fascist projects, which may oppose particular state forms in pursuit of ever more authoritarian forms of dominance.

⁹ Bailey himself is careful to trouble the notion that the forming of the LSC on the 18th of November 1968 marks *the* beginning of the modern squatters' movement, however – 'the seed had been sown long before', he argues (Bailey, 1973, p. 21). In noting that the work of the LSC cannot be easily demarcated from previous mobilising, Bailey points especially to the squatters' movement of the 1940s and the wave of occupations sparked by that of the King Hill Hostel in West Malling (between August 1965 and July 1966) as important influences on the LSC (Bailey, 1973).

negotiations which, on the 13th of December 1969, led to Lewisham Council granting the use of empty council properties on a ‘short-life’ basis to squatters who had occupied them – thus marking the beginning of short-life licenses. Bailey’s account, then, is key in that the tactics and goals of the LSC and the SELS shaped squatting in England and Wales for decades afterwards. Further, touching on the conflict between groups such as the LSC and ‘hedonistic’, ‘hippie’ squatted communities such as the one established by the London Street Commune at 144 Piccadilly in 1969, Bailey’s account provides an early glimpse into tensions around legitimacy and respectability which mark discourses on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ squatters to this day (Bowman, 2004; Dadusc & Dee, 2015; Dee & Santos, 2015; Manjikian, 2013; Milligan, 2016; Platt, 1980a; Vasudevan, 2017).

Also foundational to both academic and non-academic work on squatting is the edited collection *Squatting: The Real Story* (Wates & Wolmar, 1980). Published in 1980, it remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of squatting in Britain – indeed, some consider it to be ‘[t]he unorthodox bible of UK squat history’ (x-Chris, 2015, p. 116; Vasudevan, 2017). Edited by Nick Wates and Christian Wolmar, it includes facts and figures on squatting, housing and empty property in England as well as (crucially!) Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and personal reflections on squatting by squatters. Contributions centre on the law around squatting; on the challenges and joys of repairing buildings; on campaigning groups such as the London Squatters Campaign and the Advisory Service for Squatters; and on squatted communities such as London’s Villa Road (in Brixton), Tolmers Square and Elgin Avenue. Over the course of twenty-three entries, *Squatting: The Real Story* connects squatting in the United Kingdom to a much broader range of struggles and politics than much writing on squatting since. Its sustained importance to the literature, however, means that many of its emphases and omissions continue to be reproduced.

The perspectives that extant work on squatting in England offers are important and generative, but the repeated focus on the late 1960s and 1970s and on a small range of organisations and dynamics has led to vital political lineages, struggles and spaces being overlooked. With regard to the concerns of this thesis, this literature has, crucially, long neglected how squatting has intersected with anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and queer struggles and politics, and how gender, race and sexuality have operated in squats. The persistent focus of the literature on such a narrow range of collectives, projects, squats and time periods, and its insistent emphasis on questions of representation, tactics and legitimacy obscure vital arenas of struggle (Dadusc & Dee, 2015; Davis, 2017; Dee & Santos, 2015; Dee,

2014; Manjikian, 2013; Milligan, 2016; Platt, 1980a; Reeve, 2005).¹⁰ In many ways, the attention given to these essentialises and circumscribes squatting in the very act of exploring it and the issues and dynamics surrounding it. Literature on squatting in England cannot, of course, be abstracted from the conditions in which it is produced – which include the time and resources (un)available to many of those researching and writing about squatting.¹¹ While many of these emphases, repetitions and omissions must be understood in the context of such working conditions, it is imperative to note that they (re)produce and reinforce exclusionary narratives of squatting which, cumulatively, coalesce into erasure (and sometimes, perhaps, even a kind of willful ignorance or obstinate unknowing) (Vimalassery, et al., 2016). This is especially so with regard to the experiences, labour and agency of non-white people. Allusions, glimpses and mentions are not enough; these gesture to anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and queer struggles while simultaneously keeping them relegated to the margins. This is not simply an issue of inclusion and diversity, but of accountability, power and epistemology. What are the consequences of reproducing such narratives? Building on key – although very rare – exceptions to this trend (which are outlined below) this thesis foregrounds anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and queer struggles and politics, and the ways in which gender, race and sexuality have operated in squatted spaces, communities and projects.

Further, as noted in Chapter 1, while it has long been observed that squatting has enabled people in England to engage in often deeply transformative and explicitly political experiments with communal living, the specific dynamics of these experiments and the politics and spaces informing them remain largely under-explored in academic literature (Dee, 2014; Reeve, 2005; Vasudevan, 2017; Wates & Wolmar, 1980; x-Chris, 2015). Although there have been vitally important exceptions to this tendency, it is for the most part only very recently that broader political connections and the difficulties, pleasures, negotiations at stake in squatted communities and projects have begun to be explored by academic scholars (Brown, 2007; Cook, 2013; Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b; Wall, 2017). Crucially, the materiality of squatted

¹⁰ Alexander Vasudevan's recent panoramic chapter-length overview of squatting in London highlights many of these connections and offers rich glimpses into groups, communities and squats otherwise entirely absent from the literature – such as East London Big Flame, a group of feminist activists active between 1973 and 1975; the Squatters Network of Walworth (SNOW), active between 1983 and 1988; and a vibrant community of over a hundred squatters in Ellingfort Road, in London's Borough of Hackney. The Brixton Gay Community, the 121 Centre and the Brixton Black Women's Group (all of which this thesis focuses on) make very brief appearances in his account. Perhaps due to its sheer breadth, Vasudevan's account does not engage in depth with the politics, spaces and dynamics of squat collectives.

¹¹ Indeed, this point very much applies to this thesis, too. A chapter of this thesis – focusing on the 'Rebel Dykes' anarchafeminist squats and networks of 1980s Brixton (Fahey, 2019; Lloyd, 2017; Riot Productions, 2020) – was ultimately cut due to the difficulties of completing this project as the COVID-19 pandemic set in and a national lockdown put in place. Although the Rebel Dykes I interviewed are no longer quoted directly, their interviews were vital to this project overall and I drew on them extensively throughout the development and writing of this thesis. I am currently working on turning this excised chapter into a journal article.

spaces is rarely engaged with in the literature beyond instances of their successful transformation by activists. Drawing and building on these interventions, this thesis insists on the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. Starting from an understanding of communities, communal subjectivities, political projects and their spaces not as self-evident, organic or spontaneous occurrences but as constantly (re)constituted, this thesis foregrounds the spatial, material and infrastructural dimensions of these processes. Squatting presented, for the groups, communities and projects this thesis focuses on, distinctive challenges and opportunities; the squatted spaces in which they organised had a direct impact on their dynamics, work and politics. Squatting gained meaning from the specific ways in which the groups, communities and projects explored here practiced it. Being based in Brixton means they addressed and were shaped by particular political, cultural and legal contexts; focusing on one area across decades, groups, spaces and projects means that this thesis *grounds* these with a level of detail, complexity, nuance and depth of engagement that is missing in the literature.

Chapter 5 is indebted to Matt Cook's work on the Brixton Gay Community (BGC) (Cook, 2013; Cook, 2014). A history of the BGC as well as an exploration of many of its dynamics, Cook's work dwells on lived experience, memory, community and the everyday, and considers the inclusions and exclusions at stake in attempts to create alternative, liberatory political communities. He is attentive to the complex ways in which sexuality, as a ground for identity and community, is entwined with issues of race, class and gender – indeed, he devotes particular attention to dynamics around class. In Chapter 5, I revisit and expand on some of the tensions and exclusions Cook touches on, focusing specifically on the ways in which the territory of the BGC was implicitly and explicitly demarcated along boundaries of race, gender and sexuality.

The links made by Sarah Glynn between squatting, housing activism and anti-racist struggles and politics inform Chapter 6, which centres on the Brixton Black Women's Group. As noted above, literature on squatting has all-too-often neglected to consider how squatting has intersected with anti-racist and decolonial struggles and politics. In arguing that '[t]he fight for adequate and decent housing' – of which squatting is often part – 'has been intimately linked to the fight against racism' (Glynn, 2005, p. 528) Glynn's comparative study is thus a vital intervention in this literature. Glynn focuses on the East End Jewish community of the 1930s and the East End Bengali community of the 1970s. As Glynn details, the membership of the Communist Party in the East London district of Stepney was, in the 1930s, predominantly Jewish. Seeing poor housing conditions and fascism as a result of the same social and economic factors, the predominantly Jewish membership of the Stepney branch of

the Communist Party led campaigns for better housing *and* against fascism. These campaigns included rent strikes and eviction resistances. Four decades later, many East End Bengali families responded to their dire housing conditions – which were often a direct consequence of racism on the part of the local housing authority – by squatting, first as individual families and eventually collectively as part of the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG). Glynn charts the beginnings of the BHAG, as well as the tensions which resulted when members of the *Race Today* collective sought to turn the BHAG into a movement for radical Black self-organisation.¹² Chapter 6 also draws on the more recent work of Amy Tobin (Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b) and Christine Wall (2017). Art historian Amy Tobin pieces together a history of a collective feminist art exhibition and installation in a squatted house in the south London area of Vauxhall in the spring of 1974. Located at 14 Radnor Terrace and organised by the feminist art group S.L.A.G. (South London Art Group), the installation and group exhibition – titled *A Woman's Place* – offered a critique of working class, heteronormative, white British experiences of family life. For Tobin, it is not incidental that it took place in a squatted house: ‘Squatting’, she argues, ‘provided a means of inexpensive living and of challenging conservative connotations of home’ (Tobin, 2017b, n.p.).¹³ Similarly, in her account of a community of women, many of them lesbians, who squatted in north London’s Hackney area in the 1970s and 1980s, Wall notes that squatting ‘provided the physical and spatial infrastructure for the feminist activism in 1970s London’ (Wall, 2017, p. 93). Tobin and Wall’s important contributions focus on radical feminist politics, projects and spaces. As is made clear in Chapter 6, the Black socialist feminist politics of the BBWG were often and explicitly in great tension with those of radical feminists. Building on Tobin and Wall, Chapter 6 contributes explorations of very different feminist politics, spaces and projects, which yield very different insights into deployments of squatting.

Chapter 7 (which dwells on the first Queeruption gathering, in 1998) and Chapter 8 (which focuses on the House of Brag) draw on Gavin Brown’s ethnography of a range of queer

¹² The *Race Today* collective – so named after the journal they produced – was central to many struggles for racial liberation in Britain (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Waters, 2019). Its members included Jean Ambrose, Barbara Beese, Farrukh Dhondy, Patricia Dick, Leila Hassan, Darcus Howe, Gus John, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Akua Rugg and Mala Sen (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017; Waters, 2019). From 1973 to 1988, the collective’s journal was home to the work of the leading Black British intellectuals and activists of the time (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019). C.L.R. James lived above their Brixton offices (at 165-7 Railton Road) in his later years, until his death in 1989 (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017).

¹³ As Tobin notes, Radnor Terrace and the neighbouring Rosetta Street were home to an active community of women through the 1970s: The *Women's Liberation Workshop Newsletter* was published from Radnor Terrace between July and October 1973, and 14 Radnor Terrace itself was also the location of the South London Women’s Centre for a time (Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b). The See Red Women’s Workshop collective were also briefly based there in 1975 (See Red Women’s Workshop, 2016; Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b). The street was demolished to make way for property developments (Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b).

autonomous spaces and events (not all of them squatted) (Brown, 2007). Among these is the fourth Queeruption gathering, which took place in a squatted east London tenement block over five days in March 2002. His is a rich and all-too-rare account of an anti-capitalist, anti-assimilationist, queer squatted project in the context of the global justice movement of the early 2000s. He outlines the way in which Queeruption participants transformed the tenement block, making room for nearly 500 people (of which around 150 stayed on-site) as well as a vegan café and a wide range of events. He also touches on a number of points of tension within the broader Queeruption collective (including unintended power imbalances, ‘macho posturing’ during protests and issues raised by activists of colour in the predominantly white Queeruption network) as well as negotiations during the fourth Queeruption gathering (especially around the sex party). Bearing these tensions in mind, Brown suggests that ‘the process of collective experimentation to build autonomous queer spaces is ultimately more transformative and *empowering* than the resulting structures’ (Brown, 2007, pp. 2685, emphasis mine), and that ‘one of the politically most important aspects of these events is the way that they increase the intensity of affective attachment, creativity, and connectivity’ (Brown, 2007, pp. 2695-6). Brown is correct in emphasising the importance of these dynamics, intensities and attachments – they are indeed crucial to such projects. Understandings of their complexities might, however, be expanded by considering what constrains them. What happens when attempts to build autonomous queer spaces are experienced as anything but empowering; when attempts to create such spaces impede connectivity; when affective attachments are experienced as sources of intense pressure and vulnerability; and when buildings are not successfully transformed? I consider these issues in Chapter 8, with regard to the House of Brag.

To summarise, this thesis contributes to and departs from the existing literature on squatting in England in the following key ways: It carefully *spatialises* the processes through which identities, collectivities and political projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated, insisting on and demonstrating the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. Where many accounts of squatting in England position squats as simply the grounds in which people have engaged in experiments with communal living, and the areas in which these experiments took place as having played an incidental role, this thesis argues that efforts to think and live social and political alternatives cannot be abstracted from their material geographies. This thesis also *documents* histories, spaces, dynamics, politics, archives and projects which have largely been neglected in both academic and non-academic literature on squatting in England. Notably, it foregrounds the ways in which anti-racist, decolonial, feminist and queer struggles and politics have intersected with squatting. Finally, this thesis critically *interrogates and expands* how

squatting in England has been conceptualised. Going beyond questions of tactics, media discourses, legitimacy and respectability which characterise so much of the literature on squatting in England, this thesis examines the ways in which gender, race and sexuality have operated in squatted spaces, communities and projects. It dwells on the lived experiences, difficulties, pleasures and negotiations at stake in attempts to create liberatory communities, spaces and projects – which have often been alluded to in the literature, but seldom explored. Thinking squatting *through* the collectives, spaces, dynamics politics, histories and projects this thesis explores, I argue, can profoundly reframe our understandings of squatting.

Squatting and the Law

The legislation outlined below must be understood in light of deep-rooted, complexly interrelated customs in England with regard to property, trespass and ‘adverse possession’, as these are at the heart of what has become popularly known as ‘squatters’ rights’ (Finchett-Maddock, 2015; Ward, 1980).

English law has traditionally not regarded the act of squatting, in and of itself, as a criminal offence (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Watkinson, 1980). In legal terms, squatters are trespassers: they are on property which someone else owns (or to which someone else is entitled) without their permission (Watkinson, 1980). Trespass has, traditionally, been regarded not as a matter between an individual and the state (which would be a matter for criminal law), but as a dispute *between individuals* over the possession of property (Watkinson, 1980). Thus, trespass has long been, legally, a civil matter: a dispute which the owner of a property must resolve with trespassers in civil court (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Watkinson, 1980). In England, then, trespass and squatting have long been *unlawful* (an action which is wrongful by virtue of the civil law) but not *illegal* (an action which is wrongful by virtue of the criminal law) (Watkinson, 1980).

Through the legal principle of ‘adverse possession’, a person who does not have legal title to a piece of land can acquire ownership of it provided they have been in continuous possession or occupation of it without the permission of its legal owner for a period of time specified by the relevant statutes of limitations (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Finchett-Maddock, 2015; Waring, 2015).¹⁴ Thus, under specific circumstances, squatters, having *trespassed* onto land, were able to then acquire *lawful* ownership of it.

¹⁴ Statutes of limitations set out timescales within which action may be taken with regard to legal disputes. These have varied over the centuries. For example, the Statute of Limitations of 1623 fixed a term of six years for actions relating to a number

Adverse possession can be traced back to the common-law concept of *seisin*, which, in English feudal society, came to denote a type of possession that accrued credibility with the passage of time (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Although some argue that *seisin* is synonymous with ‘possession’ (Bordwell, 1921; Callahan, 1961), *seisin* did not denote possession or ownership *per se* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). Rather, it established land as belonging to those who *used* it and exercised rights over it (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011; Nicol, 2018). The concept of *seisin* was essential to the settling of claims to land in periods when formal evidence of ownership was rare (Nicol, 2018; Waring, 2015). In many ways, it simply recognised and ratified what was already happening on the ground (Nicol, 2018).

Initially, *seisin* served to protect the interests of feudal barons and their descendants, whose property had in many cases been bestowed by monarchs without much in the way of formal documentation (such as paper title deeds) (Nicol, 2018). A seemingly unintended consequence of *seisin*, however, is that it also came to afford some protection to peasants who trespassed on land and made long-term use of it (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). In a dispute over *seisin*, priority would be given to the person who had, for example, tilled the land (and could prove it) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). Thus, in many cases, trespassers’ long-term possession of land was ‘recognised on grounds of both morality and economic and transactional efficiency’ (Cobb & Fox, 2007, p. 240).

Customs – and later, legislation – based on such understandings of trespass, use and possession were, as noted by Peter Vincent-Jones, ‘concerned principally with preserving the peace’ rather than with protecting private property as such (Vincent-Jones, 1986, p. 354). ‘The protection of private property’, Vincent-Jones argues, ‘was incidental to the preservation of public order’ (Vincent-Jones, 1986, p. 354). At stake in legislation surrounding squatting in England has been a shift towards the protection of property, above all other considerations (Cobb & Fox, 2007). This has entailed the gradual redefinition of trespass, in some instances, as a criminal rather than a civil matter, as well as the curbing of the recognitions afforded squatters by the concept of adverse possession. In what follows, I briefly summarise legislation

of matters, including trespass – although according to William Buckland and Arnold McNair, it had ‘no special concern with [the protection of] property’ (Buckland, et al., 1952, p. 118). The Real Property Limitation Act of 1833 applied a fixed limitation period of 20 years for all actions relating to land (Buckland, et al., 1952; Nicol, 2018). This 20-year limitation period was then reduced to 12 years by the Real Property Limitation Act of 1874 (Callahan, 1961; Nicol, 2018). The subsequent English Limitation Act of 1939 consolidated the previous enactments and kept the limitation period for all actions relating to land fixed at 12 years (Buckland, et al., 1952). The 12-year limitation period for actions relating to land was also retained by the in-force Limitation Act of 1980 (Nicol, 2018).

in England with regard to trespass and adverse possession which has had repercussions for squatting in the time periods and spaces this thesis explores.

Forcible Entry and Detainer Act 1381

The foundation of modern legislation around squatting in England is what has become known as the Forcible Entry and Detainer Act of 1381 (FEDA 1381) (Figure 2-1). Originally written in Anglo-Norman, it was enacted by Richard II in the year of the Peasants' Revolt in order to deal with land disputes (Barker, 2014; Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Manjikian, 2013; Reeve, 2015; Ward, 1980).¹⁵ It has commonly been interpreted as forbidding entry by force on *any* land until the dispute over it was settled and a warrant or possession order granted – thus evidencing, as noted above, a focus on preserving the peace over other considerations (Watkinson, 1980). As Colin Ward has noted, 'rights of access to, and use of, common land were absolutely vital to the self-sufficient peasant economy of the 14th century', and the FEDA 1381 afforded these rights some protection (Ward, 1980, p. 105). Provided trespassing peasants had obtained possession of land by peaceful means, neither the owner or any other person could enter by force without committing an offence (Vincent-Jones, 1986, p. 354). Thus, peasants occupying land could, under the FEDA 1381, prosecute those committing forcible entry on that land (Ward, 1980).

Although technical amendments to the FEDA 1381 were made in 1391, 1429, 1588 and 1623, the protections it afforded with regard to forcible entry remained essentially unchanged; thus, almost six centuries after its enactment, the FEDA 1381 was vital to the squatters' movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Ward, 1980). Under it, squatters could not be convicted of forcible entry into unoccupied property as long as no force was used to enter the property (for example, by entering through an open window) (Watkinson, 1980). If squatters secured the property (for example, by putting a lock on the door), then neither the owner nor the police could enter or evict them without breaking criminal law (Watkinson, 1980). Squatters would

¹⁵ The Anglo-Norman text, as it appears in the 1870 revised edition of *The Statutes* (here in Roman script, sans most Anglo-Norman accents), states: 'Et Auxint le Roi defende q nully desore face entree en aucunes tres & teñz sinoun en cas ou entree est done p la loy, & en cell cas nemye a forte main ne a multitude des gentz, einz tantsoulement en [lisible & aisee] mane, et si nully desore face a contraire & ent soit convict duement soit puniz p emprisonment de son corps & dilloeqs reint a la voluntee le Roy' (The Statutes, 1870, p. 227). The English translation in the same edition of *The Statutes* reads: 'And also the King defendeth, that none from henceforth make any entry into lands and tenements, but in case where entry is given by the law; and in such case not with strong hand, nor with multitude of people, but only in [peaceable] and easy manner. And if any man from henceforth do the contrary, and thereof be duly convict, he shall be punished by imprisonment of his body, and thereof ransomed at the King's will' (The Statutes, 1870, p. 227).

then normally be secure until the owner obtained a possession order (Watkinson, 1980).¹⁶ The FEDA 1381 remained in force until its repeal by the Criminal Law Act of 1977.

Railway Regulation Act 1840 and British Transport Commission Act 1949

Section 55 of the British Transport Commission Act of 1949 made it a criminal offence to trespass (and by extension, squat) on railway lines and any areas ‘in dangerous proximity to them’ (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1949, n.p.). This supplemented Section 16 of the Railway Regulation Act of 1840, which criminalised refusing to leave railway premises when asked to do so by railway staff, as well as trespassing on areas of railway premises where the public is not allowed (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1840, c. 97, s. 16). These criminal offences are worth mentioning due to the fact that they are rare instances of the criminalisation of trespass, as well as the fact that, as the *Squatters’ Handbook* observes, ‘[t]here’s a huge number of empty railway arches and other ... buildings that are attached to the railways’ (Advisory Service for Squatters, 2016, p. 84).¹⁷ The extent to which this legislation has been and is used against squatters is unclear, however. Although the *Handbook* warns that ‘there are a few special criminal offences which you need to know about’, it also notes that ‘[a] railway arch can be made pretty cosy, and many squatters have managed to squat Network Rail properties without much difficulty’ (Advisory Service for Squatters, 2016, p. 84).

Criminal Law Act 1977

Between 1971 and 1977, a series of judgements – made primarily by Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls – laid the groundwork for what would become the Criminal Law Act of 1977 (CLA 1977) (Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Vincent-Jones, 1986; Watkinson, 1980). The CLA 1977 repealed the Forcible Entry and Detainer Act of 1381 (while retaining some aspects of it) and created five new criminal offences relating to squatting and trespass.

¹⁶ In some cases, squatters in the late 1960s and early 1970s managed to get around the hurdles presented by possession orders by simply swapping squats with other people, as possession orders were held to apply only to the individuals named in them (Bailey, 1973; Watkinson, 1980). New possession orders would then be required to evict the new arrivals (Bailey, 1973; Watkinson, 1980). This loophole was closed in 1975 by a case at the Divisional Court of the Queens Bench Division of the High Court (Watkinson, 1980). The court decided that possession orders related to the premises, not the people in them (Watkinson, 1980).

¹⁷ The *Squatters’ Handbook* was first published by the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) in London in 1976. The ASS has continued to publish updated editions, providing detailed legal and practical information about squatting and homelessness in England and Wales. At the time of writing, the *Handbook* is on its 14th edition (Advisory Service for Squatters, 2016).

Section 6

Section 6 of the CLA 1977 made it a criminal offence to use or threaten violence to secure entry into a property *knowing there is someone present opposed to the entry* (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1977). Thus, it became possible for landlords to evict squatters if *they were all out of the property* (Finchett-Maddock, 2014). If, however, there was at least one squatter on the premises at all times and they made their presence known, it was still a criminal offence for the owner or anyone else to enter the premises and attempt to evict them (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Vincent-Jones, 1986). Under Section 6, squatters did not commit an offence by occupying a property provided there was no one already on the premises at the time (Watkinson, 1980). Squatters, however, had to take care not to be caught damaging anything in the premises, as they could then be prosecuted for criminal damage, under Section 1 of the Criminal Damage Act 1971 (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1971; Shelter Legal, 2018a).¹⁸

Section 7

Section 7 of the CLA 1977 made two significant changes. First, it created the legal categories of ‘displaced residential occupier’ (DRO) and ‘protected intending occupier’ (PIO). A DRO is someone living in a residential property (a house or flat) who has been displaced by squatters (Manjikian, 2013). A PIO is someone who, while not in occupation of the property at the time it was squatted, has an immediate need to occupy it as a home and is prevented from doing so by the fact of it being squatted (this could be, for example, someone who purchased a home and planned to move into it imminently, or council tenants due to move into a council flat) (Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Manjikian, 2013). Second, Section 7 of the CLA made it an offence to fail to leave residential premises after having been asked to do so by a DRO or a PIO (Manjikian, 2013).

¹⁸ Much more rarely, squatters were charged under Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824, which, among other things, criminalised ‘every person wandering abroad and lodging in any barn or outhouse, or in any deserted or unoccupied building, or in the open air, or under a tent, or in any cart or waggon’, as well as ‘every person being found in ... any inclosed [sic] ... area, for any unlawful purpose’ (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1824, c.83; Wates & Wolmar, 1980). In also making it an offence to sleep in a public place or beg, Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 essentially criminalised homelessness (Holligan, 2015). Although sparingly used against squatters, Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 has been widely used as a tool of racist harassment (Jackson, 2015). It is better known for being the basis of the infamous ‘sus laws’, which effectively permit the police to stop, search and arrest anyone in a public place that they so much as *suspect* might intend to commit an offence (‘sus’ is a colloquial abbreviation of ‘suspicion’) (Ford, 2015; Jackson, 2015). It is disproportionately used against Black people, and ‘was understood to be one of the, if not the most, important contributing factors to the 1981 Brixton riot’ (Jackson, 2015, p. 159). Section 4 received renewed attention when it was used in late October 2013 to charge three men for taking food from bins behind a supermarket in north London’s Kentish Town (Gentleman, 2014).

Section 8

Section 8 of the CLA 1977 made it a criminal offence to trespass with ‘any weapon of offence’ – defined as ‘any article made or adapted for use for causing injury to or incapacitating a person, or intended by the person having it ... for such use’ (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1977, c. 45, s. 8.2). As some have noted, this is a broad enough definition that it ‘technically could be used against any squatter who carries a pen knife’ (Watkinson, 1980, p. 162).

Section 9

Section 9 of the CLA 1977 made it a criminal offence to trespass on embassy or consular property (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1977; Watkinson, 1980).¹⁹

Section 10

Section 10 of the CLA 1977 made it an offence to resist or obstruct bailiffs in any way once the owners of a property had obtained a possession order (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1977; Watkinson, 1980).

In summary, although the CLA 1977 made squatting much more difficult, it did not make it illegal outright. It also further criminalised trespass, in specific circumstances. Provided squatters entered (without force and without weapons) into a non-diplomatic or non-consular property that was unoccupied at the time of entry, they were not committing criminal acts. Provided the squatters managed to secure the property, that at least one of them was in the property at all times and that they were not seen to commit criminal damage, the property’s owners and the police were unable to enter the property. If, however, the property was a residence and there was someone living in it or intending to move into it, the squatters would have to leave when requested by that person – or break criminal law by refusing to do so. In instances in which there were no DROs or PIOs, squatters would be able to stay in the property until a possession order was granted to the owner. They would then have to leave without posing any resistance – or break criminal law by refusing to do so.

¹⁹ An instance in which squatters moved into the former Mexican Embassy and the adjacent former Tanzanian High Commission in London’s Mayfair in 2009 (Irvine, 2009) was, however, not a criminal offence under Section 8, as the buildings were *no longer* an embassy and high commission at the time they were squatted.

Limitation Act 1980

In line with previous statutes of limitations, Section 15 of the Limitation Act of 1980 (LA 1980) states that no action shall be brought to recover any land after a period of 12 years (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1980; Nicol, 2018). This included squatted properties. Thus, according to the LA 1980, squatters could claim adverse possession and automatically acquire legal ownership of a property if they could prove that they had been in continuous possession or occupation of it for 12 years, provided they did not have the owner's permission to be there and the owner had not sought to recover it in that time (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Finchett-Maddock, 2015). It is important to note that the LA 1980 itself made no significant changes with regard to adverse possession – it simply consolidated previous statutes (Nicol, 2018). It was, however, widely interpreted as providing judicial assistance to squatters (Cobb & Fox, 2007). The LA 1980 thus became, in the eyes of many, an unacceptable emblem of 'squatters' rights', and the backlash against it paved the way for the changes enacted by the Land Registration Act of 2002 (Cobb & Fox, 2007).

Aviation Security Act 1982 and Aviation and Maritime Security Act 1990

Section 21C of the Aviation Security Act of 1982 made it into a criminal offence to be (and by extension, squat) in restricted areas in airports (provided there is a clearly displayed sign stating that the area is restricted), as well as to remain in a restricted area after being asked to leave (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1982). Although this is another rare – and thus notable – instance of the criminalisation of trespass, squatters in England have not traditionally sought to squat airports. This change has thus had negligible implications for squatting.

Eight years later, the Aviation and Maritime Security Act of 1990 introduced a range of criminal offences relating to 'endangering safety' at airports and docks, which, in their broad applicability, makes squatting in such premises virtually impossible without it being a criminal offence (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1990, c. 31, s. 1). As with the Aviation Security Act of 1982, these offences have so far had negligible implications for squatting – although it must, nonetheless, be noted as a further criminalisation of trespass.

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

Implemented in the context of what many see as the escalation of a widespread crackdown on so-called ‘anti-social behaviour’ throughout the 1990s (Manjikian, 2013; Wakefield & Grrrt, 2003 [1995]), Sections 72, 73 and 76 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (CJA 1994) pertain directly to squatting (Howard, 1994).

Section 72

Building on Section 7 of the CLA 1977, Section 72 of the CJA 1994 gave DROs and PIOs (as well as *anyone* proving to be acting on their behalf) the permission to use ‘violence’ (Howard, 1994, p. 68) to enter a squatted residential property.

Section 73

Section 73 made it a criminal offence not to leave squatted residential premises when requested to do so not only by DROs and PIOs, but *anyone proving to be acting on their behalf* (Howard, 1994). Further, police were given powers to arrest, without a warrant, anyone they *suspected* of violating section 73 (Howard, 1994). Those found guilty faced six months’ imprisonment, a £5,000 fine, or both (Howard, 1994; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b).

Section 76

Section 76 of the CJA 1994 introduced ‘interim possession orders’ (IPO) – a ‘fast-track’ or ‘quick remedy’ eviction process against squatters (Shelter Legal, 2018b; Manjikian, 2013). Once an IPO was granted by a court (and provided that all the necessary legal procedures were correctly followed), squatters were required to leave the designated premises – whether residential or commercial – within 24 hours of its serving and to not return within 12 months (Manjikian, 2013). Failing to leave the premises or returning within one year are both criminal offences (Howard, 1994). Interim possession orders cover anyone in the premises when an order is served, as well as anyone arriving at any time before the order expires (Howard, 1994). Those found guilty under Section 76 would be liable to six months’ imprisonment, a £5,000 fine, or both (Howard, 1994; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Shelter Legal, 2018b).

Land Registration Act 2002

The Land Registration Act of 2002 (LRA 2002) took aim at squatters' ability to acquire ownership of a property through adverse possession – which, as noted above, was seen by many as an unacceptable feature of the LA 1980. Although it is still *technically* possible for squatters to acquire ownership through adverse possession, the LRA 2002 made it virtually impossible (Cobb & Fox, 2007).

Under the LA 1980, squatters could claim adverse possession and automatically acquire legal ownership of a property if they could prove that they had been in continuous possession or occupation of it for 12 years, *provided they had not been granted permission to be there by the owner and the owner had not sought to recover it in that time* (Manjikian, 2013). Under the LRA 2002, squatters are, after 10 years, still entitled to apply to the Land Registry to become the new registered owners of a property (Waring, 2015). The Land Registry has now been tasked, however, with notifying *everyone* who might have a claim to the property – including the registered owner – of the squatters' application (Finchett-Maddock, 2015; Irvine, 2002; Manjikian, 2013; Waring, 2015). Registered owners then have two years to defeat the application, which they can do simply by raising an objection (Finchett-Maddock, 2014). Only if a registered owner does not object in those two years do squatters now gain ownership (Irvine, 2002). Having been made aware of a squatter's application by the Land Registry, however, it is exceedingly unlikely that a registered owner would not seek to retain ownership of a property. According to Neil Cobb and Lorna Fox, the changes wrought by the LRA 2002 had far-reaching moral implications: it effectively 'transform[ed]', they argue, 'the fundamental basis of entitlement to land in English law, from *possession* of land as a good root of title, to *registration* as the source of title' (Cobb & Fox, 2007, p. 241).

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012

The introduction of the criminal offence of 'squatting in a residential building' in Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act of 2012 (LASPOA 2012) marked an important turning-point (Fox O'Mahony, et al., 2015b). Where previously it was a criminal offence to squat a residential property *if* someone was in it (under CLA 1977) and *if* there was someone living in it or intending to move into it (under CJA 1994), Section 144 made it an act of criminal trespass to squat a residential property in England and Wales *tout court*,

regardless of whether or not the property is vacant and not being lived in (Figure 2-2) (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Manjikian, 2013; Weatherley, 2012). Anyone found guilty of squatting in a residential building now faces a year in jail, a £5,000 fine, or both (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Fox O'Mahony, et al., 2015b; Manjikian, 2013).

Fox O'Mahony, O'Mahony and Hickey argue that, in presenting the enactment of Section 144 as motivated by a desire to protect 'law-abiding property owners or occupiers' (Ministry of Justice, 2011, p. 36), the Government deployed a rhetoric of 'home' that served to obscure the emphasis on protecting *vacant* residential buildings as capital investment over protecting the 'vulnerable homeless' (O'Mahony & Fox O'Mahony, 2015, p. 56; Fox O'Mahony, et al., 2015b). 'Displaced residential occupiers' and 'protected intending occupiers' were, after all, already protected by the criminal offences created by the CLA 1977 and the CJA 1994 (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Manjikian, 2013; O'Mahony & Fox O'Mahony, 2015; Reeve, 2015). The Criminal Bar Association and the Law Society strongly opposed the creation of the new criminal offence and, in September 2011, 160 lawyers signed a letter accusing the government of 'sensational misrepresentation' on the subject (Baksi, 2012, n.p.).

Just before Christmas 2012, 35-year-old Daniel Gauntlett was charged under Section 144 for breaking into a derelict house in Aylesford to sleep there (McVeigh & Hunter, 2013). The following February, sometime between the night of Saturday the 23rd and the morning of Sunday the 24th, he died of hypothermia while sleeping outside the same house (Boyle, 2013; Hunter, 2013). His death is thought to be the first as a result of Section 144 (Hern, 2013). Squatting in England and Wales remains a civil rather than a criminal matter in the interstices between these aggregated laws. Provided squatters enter (without force or weapons) an unoccupied non-diplomatic/consular, non-residential property that is not located in a railway, dockyard or airport, they are not committing criminal acts. Provided squatters secure the property, that at least one of them remains in it at all times and that they are not seen to commit criminal damage, the property's owners and the police are unable to enter the property without a possession order.

In margine
Rotuli.

**Statutū 't Ordīnaco'es edit' apud Westm̄
Anno quinto.**

STATUTE AND ORDINANCES MADE AT WESTMINSTER;
IN THE FIFTH YEAR.

Ex Rot. Stat. in Turr. Lond. II.
m. 22, 21.

vij.

Et auxint le Roi defende q̄ nully
desore face entree en aucunes lres &
teñz sinoun en cas ou entree est done
p la loy, & en celi cas nemye a forte
main ne a multitude des gentz, einz
tantsoulement en [lisible & aisee¹]
mañe, et si nully desore face a con-
traire & ent soit convict duement soit
puniz p emprisonement de son corps
& dilloeqs reint a la voluntee le Roy.

¹ { lisible aisee & peisible *Rot. Parl.*
nu. 71.
peisible & aisee *printed copies.*

STATUTE THE FIRST.

And also the King defendeth, that
none from henceforth make any entry
into any lands and tenements, but in
case where entry is given by the law;
and in such case not with strong
hand, nor with multitude of people,
but only in [peaceable¹] and easy
manner. And if any man from
henceforth do to the contrary, and
thereof be duly convict, he shall be
punished by imprisonment of his
body, and thereof ransomed at the
King's will.

VII.
Foreible entree
forbidden.

¹ lawful

Figure 2-1: Both the Anglo-Norman and English texts of the Forcible Entry and Detainer Act of 1381 (FEDA 1381), as they appear in the 1870 revised edition of *The Statutes* (1870, p. 227). Although technical amendments to the FEDA 1381 were made in 1391, 1429, 1588 and 1623, the protections it afforded with regard to forcible entry remained essentially unchanged; thus, almost six centuries after its enactment, the FEDA 1381 was vital to the squatters' movement of the late 1960s to mid-1970s (Ward, 1980).

THIS IS A NON-RESIDENTIAL BUILDING

Section 144, LASPO does NOT apply

This is NOT a “residential building” within the meaning of section 144, Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 because it was NOT designed or adapted, before the time of our entry, for use as a place to live (ss (3)(b)).

insert reasons why the above applies if not physically obvious:

The provisions of section 144 are therefore NOT APPLICABLE to this building or to our occupation of it.

**Part II, Criminal Law Act 1977
(As amended by Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994) DOES APPLY**

LEGAL WARNING

TAKE NOTICE

THAT we occupy this property and at all times there is at least one person in occupation.

THAT any entry or attempt to enter into these premises without our permission is therefore a criminal offence as any one of us who is in physical possession is opposed to such entry without our permission.

THAT if you attempt to enter by violence or by threatening violence we will prosecute you. You may receive a sentence of up to six months’ imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £5,000.

THAT if you want to get us out you will have to issue a claim for possession in the County Court or in the High Court.

The Occupiers

N.B. Signing this Legal Warning is optional. It is equally valid whether or not it is signed.

Figure 2-2: Legal warning produced by the Advisory Service for Squatters for use after the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act of 2012 (Advisory Service for Squatters, 2012). It is widely used by squatters occupying non-residential property (and was used by the House of Brag). Although the Criminal Law Act of 1977 repealed the Forcible Entry and Detainer Act of 1381, it retained some aspects of it. As evidenced by this present-day legal warning, traces of the protections the Forcible Entry and Detainer Act of 1381 afforded to squatters remain law to this day.

Chapter 3 / Methodology

Seeking to do justice to the complexities of the co-constitution of the spatial and the political – including the processes through which identities, collectivities and projects are assembled – has necessitated crafting a methodology from a variety of materials, sites, histories and disciplines. In assembling this thesis, I have combined autoethnography, historical and legal surveys, oral history interviews, archival research and mapping, among other methods. The geographies presented here have been built from material on British imperialism, narratives of feminism, urban planning, medieval and Victorian legislation and anarchist politics in 1990s England, to give only some examples. I have deployed what Jack Halberstam might refer to as a ‘scavenger methodology’, combining methods, geographies, histories and archives which are all-too-often regarded as being at odds with or disconnected from each other (Halberstam, 1998).¹ Such a ‘patching together a bit of this, and a bit of that, to make a useful history’ (DeSilvey, 2007, p. 43) and unconcern with disciplinary and methodological boundaries might open this project to charges of being non-systematic and non-rigorous (Murphy & Lugg, 2016). I would argue, however, that this is a pragmatic and responsive approach which seeks to *work with* the complexities at stake, rather than seeking to contain them in the name of disciplinary and methodological consistency or purity (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). It is an approach which takes up Vasudevan’s call for an ‘historical perspective that re-imagines the city as a living archive of alternative knowledges, materials and resources’ (Vasudevan, 2015b, p. 332) and which attends to ‘the shifting conditions of possibility for the composition of a radical urban politics’ (Vasudevan, 2015b, p. 332).

The grounding of the research which comprises this thesis has been, from the beginning, my involvement in London’s early- to mid-2010s squatting scene – in particular my involvement in the House of Brag. It is not an overstatement to say that this involvement and the relationships I gained as a result are the reason this thesis has been possible. Lived and felt experience courses through this project, and many of the people I spoke with over the course

¹ In making connections between these various materials, sites, histories and disciplines, this thesis does not only draw from existing archives but contributes to them and itself produces an archive (DeLyser, 2014; Kumbier, 2014). This archive has expanded and been taken up beyond this thesis in unforeseen and exciting ways. Drawing on my research, I have led a number of walking tours focused on the histories of squatting in Brixton, which have been used by some participants as a foundation for their own projects. As an intern at Verso Books in 2017, while working on this thesis, I set in motion the process which led to *The Heart of the Race* (Bryan, et al., 1985) – a book I drew on extensively in the course of my research on the Brixton Black Women’s Group – being republished by Verso in 2018. A twitter thread I wrote on artist Pearl Alcock in 2019 (see <https://twitter.com/MiloBettocchi/status/1176051528517541888>) served as a key resource in the organisation of an event tied to the Whitworth Art Gallery’s exhibition of Alcock’s work (Whitworth Art Gallery, 2019).

of my research would likely not have granted me interviews had I not been a squatter myself – some due to their wariness of the exploitative dynamics that can characterise academic research, and some due to hostility towards academia more broadly. Still, my ‘insider’ position had its limits. Experiences of having been squatters aside, there were a number of assumptions – with regard to my motives, my position in academia and my politics, to name only a few – that had to be navigated with many of the people I interviewed. Similarly, in many interviews the ‘queerness’ of the interviewees and myself (used conditionally in this instance as an LGBTQ and political umbrella term) supported some sense of an ‘experiential sameness’, which was often expressed through riotous, bawdy humour (Nash, 2010, p. 141; Felicianantonio, 2017). However, it was also clear that this ‘sameness’ was fragile and was negotiated constantly during our conversations. Our tentatively shared ‘queerness’ was constantly refracted and negotiated through complex social histories and geographies, age, class, points of reference and different understandings of gender and sexuality, among other factors.

The process of doing research on the histories, spaces and collectives this thesis explores has thus been marked by a number of (still unresolved) tensions. Among these are, also, issues around critical distance. This has invariably been raised during presentations I have given on my research in academic contexts, although it has usually been phrased in terms of ‘objectivity’: How, academics have wondered, have I been able to be objective when researching squats, squatters and squatting, given that I was a squatter myself? In considering this issue, I would first like to refer to the negotiations mentioned above, in order to trouble any easy or straightforward sense of ‘sameness’ or ‘insider’-ness. Secondly, and crucially, I would suggest that to see a *lack* of criticality as the primary danger of personal investment in what we research is to perhaps misunderstand and simplify the complexities of personal investment, solidarity and identification (Gibson-Graham, 2006). For example, at particular moments during the composition of this thesis, I had to question whether I was being excessively and unfairly demanding and critical of my interviewees. This disposition may have been born out of my own experiences of frustration in squatting scenes, as well as disillusionment at some of the positions expressed by some interviewees – reflecting what Clare Hemmings has referred to as ‘the disappointments that go along with investing too heavily in the significance of another’ (Hemmings, 2018, p. 2). It was, however, also my investment in and closeness to the kinds of projects explored here – my first-hand knowledge of the sheer *difficulty* of such projects – that led me to understand the need to attempt to offer more generative and generous (though still rigorous) critiques. I hope I have managed to do so. More broadly, I cannot (nor do I wish to) claim a position of objective detachment toward the

spaces, collectives, projects and issues I explore, especially when such detachment can all-too-often lead to extractive research dynamics (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). In researching and writing this thesis, I have pursued not objectivity but *accountability* – to all those I interviewed, to the projects we all invested so much in, and to myself. This requires an ongoing openness to reckoning with our failures, both personal and collective – indeed, most of the people I interviewed spoke thoughtfully and at length about many of these. It also necessitates an ongoing negotiation of the fact that ‘the business of knowing is unsteady’ (Marshall, et al., 2015, p. 1). Thus, the accounts and analyses presented here are not offered as final. This is not an abdication of responsibility on my part, but rather a recognition that we should ‘keep [our] worries’ – of which I have many – ‘and work with them’ (Rose, 1997, p. 318). Rather than seeking ‘objectivity’, I hope this thesis will be an opening towards future dialogues, and that its critiques will be received in the spirit of solidarity in which they are offered.

Oral history interviews

While fact-checking and corroborating the accounts presented here as thoroughly as possible, I have sought to work *with* the challenges that oral histories pose to methodological norms of coherence, generalisability and reliability (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). A common criticism levelled at oral history is that it is susceptible to the unreliability of memory (Perks & Thomson, 2003 [1998]). This unreliability can, however, be an incentive to use it as a method. As Alessandro Portelli has argued, ‘the importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, [and] desire break in’ (Portelli, 1981, p. 100). Further – and as a more general principle – researchers, to echo Halberstam, cannot interview people ‘expecting to squeeze truth from raw data’ (Halberstam, 1998, p. 10). These orientations are key to a project such as this one, which – *as well as* being a historical endeavour – traces the ways in which spaces, communities, political imaginaries and projects are articulated, often with great ambivalence and contradictions.²

With this in mind, I sought to conduct the oral history interviews this project deploys as *situated* (Haraway, 1988) collaborations between myself and each person I interviewed; collaborations in which we both played an active role in (re)presenting histories, spaces and

² Lest such dynamics be perceived as unique and confined to qualitative research, it is important to also note the reliance of social science and other scientific methods on strategies such as narrative analysis, interpretation, and speculation (Haraway, 1988; Halberstam, 1998).

projects (Riley & Harvey, 2007). I favoured open-ended lines of inquiry which would, I hoped, give people more room to tell their stories as they wished. This approach worked very well in some cases; in others, interviewees expressed feeling somewhat adrift due to the open-endedness of my questions, and politely requested I pursue more specific lines of inquiry. During some interviews, some people began, of their own volition, to talk about very difficult experiences; with their wellbeing foremost in my mind, it was difficult to know whether it was best to attempt to delicately move past the emotionally fraught topic or to hold space for them to talk about the matter further. I was and remain anxious about representing people's stories adequately – at times, this demanded that I address and dwell on such difficult experiences here, rather than avoid them. I have sought to do so in ways that honour them, rather than instrumentalise or exploit them.

My approach to the oral histories I have gathered also bears on my approach to those I draw on but did not collect myself. Some of the people interviewed had already participated in a variety of oral history projects, individually and communally. I draw on transcripts and audiovisual recordings of many of these, as well as on transcripts of interviews conducted specifically for an academic study (Cook, 2013). Although the sharing and reusing of qualitative data has a long history in some social science disciplines, formal and informal norms around these practices vary widely (Yoon & Kim, 2017). Even in cases that do not present significant issues with regard to ethics and privacy, concerns are sometimes raised around researchers' potential misinterpretation of data that they have not been directly involved in collecting, and which may originally have been gathered to address different research questions (Wästerfors, et al., 2014; Yoon & Kim, 2017). As noted above, however, such epistemological stakes are also present in the gathering, analysis and interpretation of original qualitative data (Wästerfors, et al., 2014). I have thus sought to approach all of the oral histories I deploy here – whether or not they were specifically formulated for this project – with care and vigilance towards these dynamics.

Most life histories contain oft-repeated anecdotes, explanations and descriptions which are bound up with the everyday, relational, on-going process of identity construction (Jackson & Russell, 2009). As E. Patrick Johnson has noted, oral histories are a form of 'storytelling' – 'a quotidian form of self-fashioning and theorizing' (Johnson, 2016, p. 53). Oral histories can thus offer rich examples of how seemingly fixed attributes, such as sexuality and gender, are constituted and operate within historically and geographically specific contexts, without by extension undermining their force and the validity of how they are *lived* (Browne & Nash,

2010; Browne & Nash, 2016; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019; Nash, 2010).³ Reading the transcripts of the interviews I conducted alongside transcripts and recordings of earlier interviews made it possible to track not only repetitions and continuities over several decades, but also shifts in beliefs, feelings and positions. In some cases, it was also possible to trace the ways in which the accounts of one person responded to and were shaped by another's account. With regard to this project, these influences should not be seen as some sort of contamination – they are part and parcel of the everyday forms of self-fashioning, -narrating and -theorising highlighted above. Narratives do not take place in isolation, and they often come together through several retellings. The interviews I conducted should be seen as instances of such (re)tellings by the people I interviewed, rather than simply new, fully-formed data.

Archives

Squatters in London have, over the decades, devoted considerable energy to archiving their practices and the spaces they created – ‘often,’ as Vasudevan emphasizes, ‘in the face of their imminent destruction’ (Vasudevan, 2017, p. 42). In his brief account of squatting in England between 1980 and 2015, x-Chris (2015) argues that these archives – which include flyers, newsletters, photos, videos and exhibitions – ‘bear witness’ not only to ‘the continuity of squatting as a political act’, but also to how ‘UK squatting culture and subculture re-invents itself continually around need and desire’ (x-Chris, 2015). This project has benefited greatly from the archival efforts by several generations of Brixton squatters. I have thus been able to put the interviews I conducted in dialogue with an array of archival material and practices.

Following the ‘archival turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, the concept of the archive is, for many, no longer bound by its traditional definition as a ‘depository of documents’ (Arondekar, et al., 2015, p. 214; Eichhorn, 2013; Kumbier, 2014). Building on Foucault’s influential concept of the archive (Foucault, 2002 [1970]) – which posits archives as discursive fields that structure ways of thinking and being in the world – the term ‘archive’ is now commonly deployed to refer not simply to ‘storage facilities’ but ‘memory structures [and] knowledge productions’ (Danbolt, 2010, p. 94) as well as any and all ‘traces of the past collected either intentionally or haphazardly as “evidence”’ (Burton, 2006, p. 3; Cvetkovich, 2003; Kumbier, 2014). ‘Archive’ has thus become ‘a kind of code word cultural scholars [can]

³ It was instructive, for example, to hear one interviewee identify as a lesbian, bisexual, a dyke and as queer – and in some instances several of these positions at once – depending on which political context, time periods and spaces of her life she was referring to.

use to signal a certain attention to the politics of knowledge production’ with regard ‘not only to what we can know of the recoverable past but also to how we know it and who can know it’ (Stryker & Currah, 2015, pp. 539-540).

The concept of the archive, then, has ‘all but lost its specificity’ (Eichhorn, 2013, p. 18) often in very generative ways.⁴ Such uses of ‘the archive’, however, have been critiqued for abstracting many complexities surrounding the formal, tangible, established archives where records of events and historical materials are maintained and accessed (Stryker & Currah, 2015; Rawson, 2015). Here, I use the term ‘archive’ to refer both to depositories of documents in the conventional sense as well as to more haphazard traces and collections of objects and practices which I have drawn on (such as films, neighbourhoods and social media platforms). It is important to note this, as all of these presented particular issues to navigate. The archives at the LSE Library and the Black Cultural Archives, for example, have strict rules around the scheduling of visits as well as the requesting, handling, use and reproduction of materials. The archivists were ever-present guides, custodians, and enforcers of protocol. This meant, among other things, that several painstakingly-planned visits were required in order to find material that was relevant to me, although it also meant I could rely on the archivists for guidance when I needed it. The 56a Infoshop archive, on the other hand, run by volunteers in a formerly-squatted anarchist social centre, practices a much more casual and DIY approach. I was free to browse the material at my leisure, completely unsupervised. This meant, however, that it was largely up to me to find my way as best as I could around the sometimes chaotically arranged material in the cramped (though very welcoming) space.⁵ Online archives, meanwhile, presented particular issues around decontextualization and circulation, and required extensive prior knowledge of particular cultural and political scenes and practices in order to be recognised *as* archives of these. For example, photographs of the first Queeruption festival were posted to a publicly-viewable album on the photo-sharing site Flickr in late July 2005 (sered, 2005). The Flickr album does not feature any accompanying text, other than the title of the album itself (‘Queeruption 1998-2007’), and the bare minimum standard information for Flickr photo albums: the username of the person who posted the album, the number of people

⁴ In conversation with Anjali Arondekar, Ann Cvetkovich, Christina B. Hanhardt, Regina Kunzel, Tavia Nyong’o and Susan Stryker, Juana María Rodríguez argues, for example, that ‘slave narratives, *rumba* (Afro-Cuban rhythms and dance), folktales, *corridos* (Mexican ballad or folksong), and porn also constitute archival forms of knowledge’ (Arondekar, et al., 2015, p. 226).

⁵ These are characteristics that the 56a Infoshop archive shares with many other DIY, activist and community archives. As Alana Kumbier notes, the collections of volunteer-managed archives often aren’t processed as quickly as the archivists might want (Kumbier, 2014). Further, the spaces in which such archives are based often serve many other functions (including as living spaces) due to funding constraints (Kumbier, 2014; X, et al., 2009). The 56a Infoshop shares a building with a food co-op as well as a bike repair workshop (56a Infoshop, n.d.). See the 56a Infoshop’s website (<http://56a.org.uk/>) as well as the work of Susan Pell (2015), Lucy Finchett-Maddock (2016) and Elena Carter (2017) for more on the on this fascinating social centre.

who have viewed the album, and the number of photos in the album. The only additional data accompanying the photos themselves are bare-bones indications of which Queeruption event they were taken at ('Queeruption London 1998'; 'Queeruption NYC 1999'; 'Queeruption 6 2004'). A certain degree of familiarity with the Queeruption movement as well as with the broader history of squatting in Brixton is thus required to be able to navigate and interpret these images – to understand, among other things, which specific events are depicted in particular photographs; that the photos were posted by one of the organisers of Queeruption; and that the photos were taken inside the now-legendary and defunct squatted 121 Social Centre.

This thesis presents a number of photographs, in addition to those of the first Queeruption festival. They are used to illustrate the ways in which squatters transformed spaces; to ground some of the histories discussed here; to indicate the material, infrastructural geographies squatters came up against; to show how Brixton's geographies have changed over time; and to foster an empathetic *sense* of the collective, material and affective stakes of these processes. They are used, in part, to provide another layer of documentation, but is imperative to note that these photographs are not offered as straightforwardly factual, objective representations of the spaces, collectives and events explored here (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 2016 [2001]; Aitken & Craine, 2005 [1997]; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018). The epistemological issues I raised with regard to the use of oral histories extend to the use photographs: As Gillian Rose reminds us, photographs 'are never transparent windows on to the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it' (Rose, 2016 [2001], p. 2).

All of the archives I draw on require careful attention to questions of ethics, access, cataloguing, dissemination and confidentiality. All but one photograph used here (which I took myself) are publicly available online and have been widely disseminated; questions remain, however, as to whether all of the people shown in these photographs consented to have their picture taken, or for them to be posted online (Dadas, 2016). Thus, all photographs featuring people who are or may still be alive have been modified to obscure their faces. More broadly, in what follows, I have given pseudonyms to *most* of the people I have interviewed and whose interview transcripts and written recollections I draw on. I have not given pseudonyms to those who requested that their names be used. Further, I have not anonymised material which was *explicitly*, from the beginning, produced – with the knowledge and consent of those involved – to be made publicly available and widely circulated. This has been the case with, for example, many of the interviews with and writing by members of the BBWG, or with the films I draw on.

Outline of materials

This thesis draws on 24 original interviews, amongst other material.⁶ All of the people I interviewed were involved – for varying lengths of time and with varying levels of commitment and intensity – in the collectives, scenes and events explored in this thesis. Most of them have been squatters. In some cases (as with House of Brag members) I knew and had lived with them for several years prior to interviewing them. In other cases, I was put in touch with people who became participants (or was pointed in their direction) by mutual acquaintances. Some participants, following our conversations, put me in touch with others they thought I would be interested in interviewing. I also cold-messaged people on social media. In one instance, a participant approached me after seeing a tweet I had posted about my research.

In semi-structured interviews, I asked participants to relate how they first began squatting, to detail the squats they lived in or were involved with, and to describe the politics which informed the squats, scenes, collectives and projects of which they had been a part. As all of the participants are based in England or Scotland, the majority of these interviews were conducted in person. Seven took place in participants' homes. Twelve took place in cafés and pubs, and three took place in my own home. One was conducted over Skype, and one over email. The interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed.

As stated above, the archives I've drawn on include the 56a Infoshop (Walworth), the Black Cultural Archives (Brixton) and the LSE Library's archive (Holborn). I also drew on the archives of the British Library (King's Cross), the archives of the George Padmore Institute (Stroud Green), Lambeth Archives (Camberwell), and the Mayday Rooms archive (City of London). Three participants kindly shared their personal papers with me, and permitted me to draw on these. I have also made use of online archives such as the websites *urban75* and *past tense* (which have long chronicled Brixton's radical histories), Lambeth Landmark (Lambeth Archives' online image collection), the aforementioned photo album posted by a Queeruption organiser on Flickr, and the House of Brag's social media profiles and WordPress blog.

In assembling a geography of Brixton, Chapter 4 draws on local and national press, reports commissioned and produced by Lambeth Council, archival film footage, the work of local historians, promotional material by property developers and a broad range of scholarly literature – from literature on the mechanisms of local government to literature on housing policy. I have also drawn on online archives such as *urban75*.

⁶ See the table of participants below.

Chapter 5 turns to the Brixton Gay Community (BGC). It draws primarily on transcripts of four sets of semi-structured oral history interviews with former members of the BGC. The first set of interviews were gathered by Jamie Hall (who was one of the BGC squatters) and Bill Thornycroft (who did not live in the BGC squats but was very much a part of the community) in 1983 and 1984. They were transcribed by Ian Townson (who lived in the BGC squats). The second set of interviews were conducted and transcribed by Townson himself in 1996 and 1997, in the course of writing a book about the BGC. Some men, who were no longer living in the United Kingdom when Townson was conducting interviews, sent Townson written accounts of their time in the BGC – I also draw on these. These two sets of interviews and written accounts are part of a collection of material that Townson donated to the LSE Library’s Hall-Carpenter Archive. I visited this archive several times between 2015 and 2017. The third set of interviews were conducted by historian Matt Cook in 2008, in the course of researching his 2013 *Twentieth Century British History* article “‘Gay Times’: Identity, Locality, Memory, and the Brixton Squats in 1970’s London” (Cook, 2013), which he later expanded into a chapter in his book *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Cook, 2014). Cook generously shared the transcripts of these interviews with me, for which I am very grateful. I re-read all of these transcripts and written accounts in light of the interviews I myself conducted with four members of the Brixton Gay Community between 2015 and 2017. I also draw on two films: Ron Peck’s autobiographical documentary *Strip Jack Naked* (1991) and Taha Hassan’s documentary *Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting* (2014). *Strip Jack Naked* contains two scenes filmed in the BGC, featuring several of its inhabitants. *Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting* includes reflections on and recollections of the BGC by many of the men who lived there. Lastly, I visited Lambeth Archives to examine Lambeth’s electoral registers from 1970 to 1995, in order to ascertain the location of ‘Pearl’s shebeen’, an illegal bar against which the boundaries of the BGC were negotiated. A short addendum at the end of this chapter gives an account of the life of Pearl Alcock – the woman who ran that shebeen – drawing primarily on my examination of Lambeth’s electoral registers, the record of Alcock’s death held by the General Register Office, correspondence with people who knew her and photos sourced from Lambeth Landmark.

Chapter 6 turns to the Brixton Black Women’s Group (BBWG). Research for this chapter took me to Lambeth Archives, the British Library, the Black Cultural Archives, and the archives of the George Padmore Institute. My work in Lambeth Archives focused on the Remembering Olive Morris collection. Gathered by the Remembering Olive Collective, it contains a wealth of documents relating to the life of BBWG co-founder Olive Morris, as well

as transcripts of interviews with 23 people who knew her (some of whom were BBWG members themselves). In Lambeth Archives, I also revisited Lambeth's electoral registers to ascertain the location of squats occupied by Olive Morris and other members of the BBWG, as well as the time periods in which they occupied these. In the British Library, I studied the transcripts of oral history interviews with two members of the BBWG, which are part of the Library's *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project* collection. Also vital to this chapter was writing by the BBWG (collectively) and by individual members. This includes the BBWG's newsletters (copies of which are held in the Black Cultural Archives) and articles the group published in *Race Today* (held in the George Padmore Institute's archive) as well as *Spare Rib* (digitized by the British Library). Interviews with and written pieces by individual BBWG members which are used here have appeared in academic journals such as *Feminist Review*, *Studies in the Maternal* and *Contemporary Women's Writing*; in the feminist publication *Trouble & Strife*; and in the edited collections *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (James & Harris, 1993) and *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Grewal, et al., 1988). Lastly, this chapter draws on interviews I conducted in 2018 – two with members of the BBWG, and one with a member of the *Race Today* Collective who squatted with Olive Morris.

Chapter 7 pieces together a social and cultural geography of the anarcho-queer collective AnarQuist, of the squatted 121 Centre and of the first-ever Queeruption gathering. It does so by drawing on original semi-structured interviews and on archival material. I interviewed two members of AnarQuist and one Queeruption participant. One of these interviews was conducted face-to-face in 2017, one over Skype in 2018, and one over email in 2018. Another member of AnarQuist declined to be interviewed, but kindly pointed me to the Mayday Rooms archive in central London and the 56a Infoshop archives in south London. These archives hold zines, flyers and photographs produced in the spaces and time periods in which AnarQuist organised, thus providing vital glimpses into the context in which the group was active; crucially, these archives also hold print material produced by AnarQuist. Additionally, I drew on the personal papers of one of the AnarQuist members I interviewed, on material available in the online urban75 archive, on accounts of the 'DIY culture' of late 1990s England and on articles which appeared in the local and national press. Photographs of the event – posted to the Flickr album mentioned above – are deployed in this chapter, as are photographs sourced from Lambeth Landmark.

Chapter 8 focuses on the House of Brag's fourth (and last) squatted social centre. As part of my research for this chapter, I conducted one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with eight

members of the House of Brag collective. I also draw on material produced by the collective (including tweets, blog posts and flyers), on articles published in the local press (including the photographs which accompanied them), on my own recollections and on images sourced from Google Maps’ Street View feature.

Table of participants

As noted above, this thesis draws on 24 original interviews. The table below outlines where in this thesis interviewees’ voices are quoted directly or felt. Three of the House of Brag members I interviewed are not quoted here directly – either because they requested this or because the points they made were expressed (in the context of the scope and timeframe available to this project) more directly by other participants. Six other participants were to be quoted directly in a section which was ultimately cut from this thesis due to the difficulties of completing this project as the COVID-19 pandemic set in and a national lockdown put in place. Although these participants are no longer quoted directly, their interviews were vital to this project overall and I drew on them extensively throughout the development and writing of this thesis. I am currently working on turning this excised section into a journal article.

Chapter: Brixton Gay Community	‘Ben’
	‘Harry’
	‘Michael’
	‘Tony’
Chapter: Brixton Black Women’s Group	Akua Rugg
	Claudette Williams
	Sona Osman
Chapter: Queeruption	‘Kath’
	Vaz
	‘Jay’
Chapter: House of Brag	‘Chlo’
	‘Jaq’
	‘Khalil’
	‘Ren’
	‘River’
	x3 participants not quoted directly
Overall thesis	x6 participants not quoted directly

Chapter 4 / A Geography of Brixton

The long, narrow London Borough of Lambeth borders the south bank of the River Thames, stretching from Vauxhall Bridge to just west of Waterloo Bridge. From the river, it spreads south for over 10km, down through Kennington, Stockwell and Clapham, to the suburbs of Streatham, Norwood and Crystal Palace. At the heart of the borough lies Brixton (Figure 4-1) (Benson, 1981; Piper, 1996).

In the 18th century, much of the Brixton area was agricultural land scattered with the late Georgian and early Victorian houses of wealthy merchants (Howarth, 2002; London Borough of Lambeth, 1967; Patterson, 1965; Piper, 1996). It provided fruit, vegetables and cattle to London's markets (Howarth, 2002). By the 19th century, Brixton had gone from a distinct rural community to (as a 1967 report by Lambeth Council described it) 'an elegant suburb for professional men and merchants' (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967, p. 1; Howarth, 2002; Piper, 1996). In the 1830s, the building of new bridges and roads brought omnibuses to the area (Benson, 1981; Howarth, 2002). The expansion of the railway network brought trains in 1862; trams followed in 1870 (Benson, 1981; Howarth, 2002). These improved transport links made the area accessible to a growing working class population who could now easily travel to and from work in central London (Benson, 1981; Howarth, 2002). Brixton's affluent residents congregated in the large detached mansions to the south of the neighbourhood (Benson, 1981). The working class residents, meanwhile, gathered in the Railton Road area, where speculative builders constructed streets of terraced and semi-detached houses to accommodate them (Benson, 1981; London Borough of Lambeth, 1967). At the intersection of several important routes, Brixton thrived during this period, with its department stores 'competing with the West End' (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967, p. 1; Benson, 1981; Howarth, 2002; Mavrommatis, 2011; Piper, 1996). In addition to its department stores, it had a lively market and the first electrically-lit street in London – Electric Avenue (Benson, 1981; Howarth, 2002; Mavrommatis, 2011; Piper, 1996). By the 1890s, as the city expanded southwards and the working class population in the area grew, Brixton's wealthy residents fled further south – to Streatham, Croydon, Wimbledon and Epsom (Benson, 1981; London Borough of Lambeth, 1967). Many of the large houses they left behind were beyond the means of the recent working class arrivals; these were subsequently rented out on a room-by-room basis and so came to house several families under a single roof (Benson, 1981; Burney, 1967).



Figure 4-1: Map situating Brixton in Lambeth as well as the Greater London area. This map appeared in a 1967 report outlining Lambeth Council’s comprehensive – and ultimately abandoned – redevelopment plans for central Brixton (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967).

Immediately after the Second World War, as a result of bomb damage and the return of people from deployment or evacuation, there was an acute housing shortage in London (Piper, 1996; Howarth, 2002). Brixton had suffered extensive bomb damage: it is believed that some German bombers miscalculated the centre of London and, in error, dropped their bombs on Brixton (Piper, 1996; Howarth, 2002). As a response to widespread homelessness, in 1945 people (especially ex-servicemen and their families) began squatting across England, Scotland and Wales on an unprecedented scale (Hinton, 1988; Vasudevan, 2017; Watson, 2016).¹ It is unclear if squatting took place in Brixton during this period; what is known is that, due to

¹ By October 1946, there were approximately 39,535 people squatting in England and Wales, with a further 4,000 squatting in Scotland (Vasudevan, 2017). As a result of intense government repression (in particular of squatters in London), this wave of squatting was short-lived (Hinton, 1988; Vasudevan, 2017; Watson, 2016).

neglect, the damage the area sustained and the age of the area's housing, house prices in Brixton fell sharply (Howarth, 2002; Patterson, 1965; Piper, 1996). The neighbourhood's mansions and terraced or semi-detached housing – now much cheaper – made for ideal boarding-houses, and their prevalence came to define Brixton (Benson, 1981; Burney, 1967; Cook, 2013; Howarth, 2002). Over time, the area came to be seen as 'a depressing district of cheap flats, theatrical boarding houses, and rented rooms' (Benson, 1981, p. 24) – although the fact that it was popular with theatre actors gave the area 'a Bohemian twist' (Cook, 2013). The area's affordable boarding-houses meant that Brixton's predominantly white English population were joined by post-war Irish, Polish, Cypriot and Maltese immigrants (Benson, 1981; Burney, 1967; Howarth, 2002; Mavrommatis, 2010). They were joined, after the passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act, by arrivals from the Caribbean and West Africa (Benson, 1981; Mavrommatis, 2011).²

One crucial factor in Brixton becoming an early base of Caribbean settlement was that, due in part to London's acute housing shortage, up to 242 of the 492 passengers of the HMT *Empire Windrush* were accommodated in Clapham Common Underground Station (which had been used as an air-raid shelter during the war) upon their arrival in 1948 (DeHanas, 2016; Patterson, 1965; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). From there, they sought work via the nearest Labour Exchange, which happened to be in Brixton's Coldharbour Lane; they then also looked for accommodation in the area (DeHanas, 2016; Patterson, 1965; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). In Brixton, these newer arrivals found cheaper rents than in other areas of London – even though they were charged higher rents than Brixton's non-Black residents (Patterson, 1965; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). These relatively cheaper rents, however, came with poor housing conditions and high local unemployment rates (Cook, 2013). Additionally, '[i]n the rather explosive local atmosphere created by the post-war housing shortage', these newer arrivals, according to social anthropologist Sheila Patterson, encountered a local council doing everything in its power to 'persuad[e] local [white] ratepayers and voters that they were not ... discriminating against local [white] applicants in favour of recently arrived [Black] migrants' (Patterson, 1965, p. 159). This, in key respects, led the council 'to do nothing whatsoever' in tackling the housing conditions the borough's Black inhabitants faced (Burney, 1967, p. 113). '[E]ven mention of

² Although the presence of Black people in Lambeth before 1948 was rare, the Caribbean and West African migrants who arrived that year were by no means Lambeth's first Black inhabitants. There were, for example, First World War volunteers from the Caribbean who had settled in the area, mainly as artisans (Patterson, 1965). One West African man owned nine or so boarding-houses in the area geared towards Black students (Patterson, 1965). There were also a few Black 'old-timer landlords' in the Somerleyton and Mostyn Road areas, whose houses, according to social anthropologist Sheila Patterson, 'were to form the nuclei of the future [Caribbean] settlement' (Patterson, 1965, p. 55). The presence of Black entertainers during Brixton's 'theatrical' period meant, according to Patterson, that Brixton landladies were 'accustomed' to taking Black lodgers – perhaps a contributing factor in Brixton becoming an early base of Caribbean settlement (Patterson, 1965, p. 55).

the subject,' according to scholar Elizabeth Burney, 'became a politically dirty word, infecting the administration with the spirit of "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil"' (Burney, 1967, p. 113). Perhaps emboldened by such attitudes and fears, the local branch of Oswald Mosley's fascist Union Movement campaigned on a 'Keep Brixton White' platform during the London County Council elections in 1952 (Patterson, 1965, p. 54).

In the context of London's post-war housing shortage (and the London County Council's related efforts to relocate both industry and a million people from Inner London to satellite New Towns), the city's overall population declined sharply (Wall, 2017).³ Between 1951 and 1961, Greater London lost around 54,000 people a year (Wall, 2017). During the same period, London's immigrant Black population grew (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). On arrival, employment and a desperate shortage of decent housing remained the two main problems facing Black migrants (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]; Wall, 2017). Landlords often ruthlessly exploited migrants, and Black tenants were commonly threatened with violence to prevent them from seeking civil remedies to their housing problems (such as reductions in their rent from rent tribunals) (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). Landlords also sometimes gave word to each other to blacklist 'trouble-making tenants' (Patterson, 1965, p. 168). In attempts to safeguard against such exploitation, some Caribbean arrivals sought out areas where they might be able to draw on the help of earlier Caribbean migrants (Piper, 1996; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). Hence, unofficial 'reception centres' were established, with the homes of earlier migrants serving as 'hostels' for newcomers (Ramdin, 2017 [1987], pp. 190-191; Patterson, 1965). Brixton was one such area (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).⁴ Thus, eleven thousand Caribbean people arrived in Lambeth between 1951 and 1961, settling primarily around Brixton's Coldharbour Lane, Somerleyton Road and Geneva Road – an area inhabited largely by *Empire Windrush* migrants (some of whom had established boarding-houses) (Benson, 1981; Bryan, 2010; Burney, 1967; Patterson, 1965). As more Black landlords established themselves, however, many of them also began to exploit newer arrivals (Patterson, 1965; Piper, 1996; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). It is worth noting that, even with the concentration of Caribbean people in such 'reception areas', it was estimated that *less than one in five* of all Caribbean migrants in London lived in these areas (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). Over 40 per cent of Caribbean migrants lived in streets where, by 1960, there was no indication of multiple Caribbean inhabitants (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).

³ After the Second World War, London steadily attracted capital and skilled labour, to the detriment of other regions (Cockburn, 1977). The London County Council embarked on wide-ranging projects to push capital and skilled labour back into depressed regions (Cockburn, 1977; Wall, 2017). Controls, for example, were placed on industrial development in the London region, and incentives offered elsewhere (Cockburn, 1977; Wall, 2017).

⁴ Other 'reception centres' were established in North Kensington, Camberwell, Islington and Hampstead (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).

Thus, although by 1966 Brixton had become the geographical focus of an expanding Black community⁵ (which Brixton had, in the increasingly agitated white English popular imagination, become synonymous with) it was not a ‘ghetto’, and understandings of it as a ‘Harlem’ in London were unwarranted (Benson, 1981; Bryan, 2010; Burney, 1967; Patterson, 1965; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).⁶

In the 1960s, London’s post-war population – including that of Lambeth – continued to decline, with the city losing around 70,000 people a year between 1961 and 1966 (Burney, 1967; Wall, 2017). Overcrowding in housing, however, became an ever more pressing issue in Brixton. Many of the (only barely inhabitable) mansions in the area continued to be let on a room-by-room basis, and so multiple households in Brixton continued to share lavatories and cooking facilities under one roof (Burney, 1967). It is important to note that *the borough as a whole was not overcrowded* (Burney, 1967). Lambeth becomes increasingly suburban towards the south, and its overall density at the time was only 50 persons per acre (Burney, 1967). The Borough Council, however, could not make much use of this fact to remedy the situation, in large part due to Greater London Council density zoning which severely restricted the building of new housing sites in the south of the borough (Burney, 1967). Even in such dire circumstances, Lambeth’s housing stock was in considerably better condition than that of some other London boroughs (Burney, 1967). Thus, a series of direct actions targeting the poor living conditions faced by many working-class families began to take place across London, and it was in this context that the London Squatters Campaign was formed on the 18th of November 1968 (Vasudevan, 2017). Some of the policies of the newly-established Greater London Council would, however, worsen the situation over the following years (Wall, 2017).

Redevelopment plans, and their consequences

Under the London Government Act of 1963 (which took effect in April 1965) the London County Council was replaced by the Greater London Council (GLC) (Burney, 1967; Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1963; Piper, 1996; Wall, 2017). Under its first Labour administration, the GLC embarked on producing a plan for the future of London (Wall, 2017).

⁵ British Pathé footage from 1961, for example, describes Brixton’s Granville Arcade as the site where a ‘Caribbean market flourishes’ (British Pathé, 2014). This footage can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45Y_QB_rt6c.

⁶ Indeed, in 1966, Lambeth’s non-white population of African, Asian or Caribbean origin – including their UK-born children – amounted only to approximately 10% of the borough’s total population; by 1971, this had increased very slightly, to approximately 12% (Benson, 1981).



Figure 4-2: Architectural studio artist's impression of Brixton as it might have looked post-redevelopment, with an elevated motorway passing over it. This illustration (which significantly underestimates the width of the proposed six-lane motorway) appeared in a 1967 report outlining Lambeth Council's redevelopment plans for central Brixton (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967).

This work continued, from 1967, under the Conservatives (Wall, 2017). The resulting Greater London Development Plan (GLDP) was published in 1969 and identified five Inner London Boroughs – Hackney, Lambeth, Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets – as containing large swathes of housing unfit for human habitation (most of which had been built in the nineteenth century) (Wall, 2017).⁷ Demolition was deemed the most expedient method of addressing this situation. Per the GLDP, once cleared, unfit housing would be replaced, for the most part, with new flats. Houses within the proposed clearance areas were to be served with compulsory purchase orders, and their occupants rehoused (Wall, 2017).

Looking ahead to the large-scale redevelopment work that would be carried out under the aegis of the GLC, proposals for the comprehensive rebuilding of central Brixton were drawn up in 1963 by Ted Hollamby, Lambeth's Chief Architect (Boughton, 2018; Piper, 1996). Crucially, Hollamby's ambitious plans revolved around a subsequently abandoned GLC project to build a six-lane elevated motorway which would have passed over Brixton (Figures Figure 4-2 and Figure 4-3) (Anning & Simpson, 1980; Boughton, 2018; Marshall, 2018; Piper, 1996). Part of a large transport interchange complex, the elevated South Cross motorway would

⁷ 'Unfit' houses were defined as lacking exclusive use of their own water supply (including hot water), a bath and an indoor toilet (Wall, 2017).

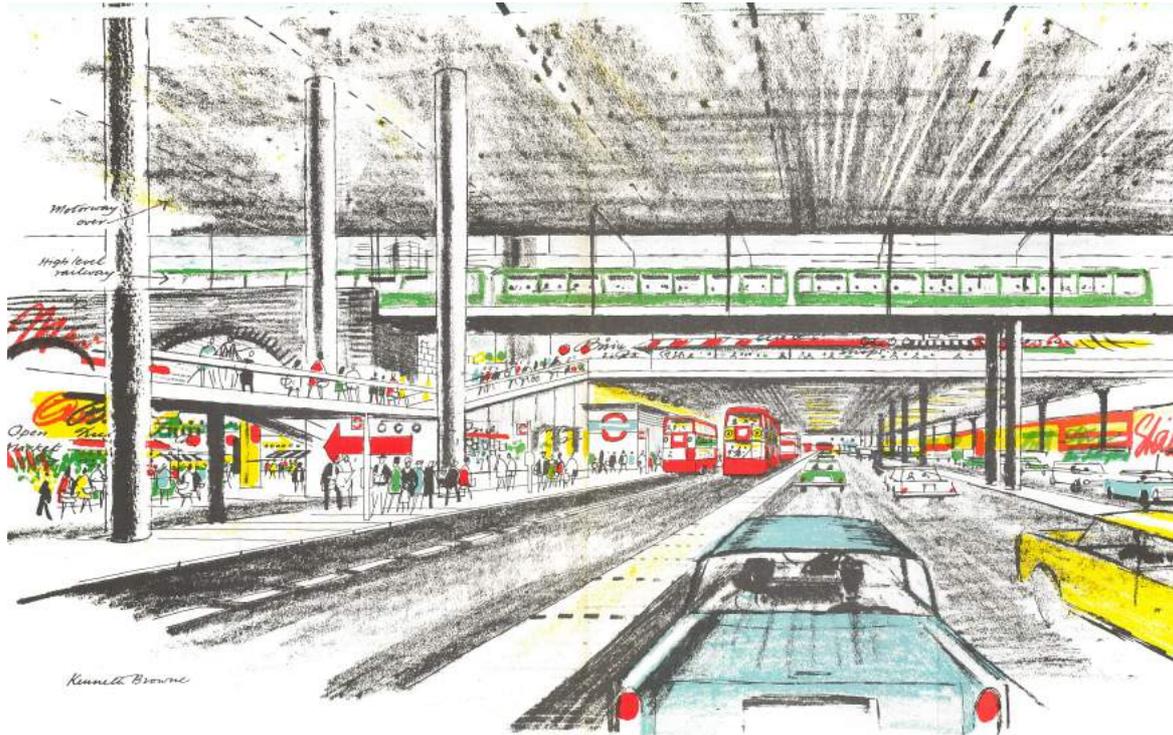


Figure 4-3: Architectural studio artist's impression of Brixton at street level post-redevelopment, with an elevated motorway passing over it. As with the previous illustration, it appeared in a 1967 report outlining Lambeth Council's redevelopment plans (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967).

have intersected in Brixton with both a main line railway and an underground railway, while also weaving around a series of elevated pedestrian walkways (Anning & Simpson, 1980; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; London Borough of Lambeth, 1967; Piper, 1996). '[C]onceived at the height of the planning mania to adapt obsolescent cities to the new motor age' (Boughton, 2018, p. 155), the South Cross motorway was part of the GLC's London Ringways project, which would have seen ring roads circle London at various distances from the city centre with the aim of reducing traffic congestion on London's roads (Boughton, 2018; Donegal, 1995; Marshall, 2018; Piper, 1996; urban75, 2010). Despite Lambeth Council's assertions to the contrary, little thought seems to have been given by the council to the effect these redevelopment plans would have on Brixton's inhabitants or existing businesses (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967; Piper, 1996). In fact, the council began to neglect even routine maintenance in the area, as it was expected that most of it would be demolished in the near future (Piper, 1996). Lambeth Council's redevelopment plans, however, required significant private investment, which it failed to secure (Piper, 1996). While developers were interested in sites where retail trade was still growing, trade in Brixton had stalled – in large part because of the council's own actions in anticipation of the redevelopment (Piper, 1996). The combination of these factors aggravated the decline of Brixton's infrastructure (Piper, 1996). Described by

Lambeth Council in 1967 as ‘one of the most vigorous, bustling and cosmopolitan centres in the whole of London’ (London Borough of Lambeth, 1967, p. 3), the area was subsequently mired in planning blight for the following two decades (Piper, 1996). The South Cross motorway was never built (Marshall, 2018). Successive versions of the Brixton redevelopment master plan – scaled down each time – were produced in 1967, 1969, 1975 and, finally, in 1980; the plans, however, continued to fail to attract private investment (Piper, 1996). In the mid-1960s and into the mid-1970s, entire streets of houses in Brixton were served with compulsory purchase orders and were scheduled to be demolished (Anning & Simpson, 1980; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). Vacant houses commanded a higher price in this scheme, and so, in anticipation of having their properties bought by the council, many landlords harassed and cheated their tenants out of their homes (Cockburn, 1977). In addition, as feminist researcher Cynthia Cockburn noted, ‘[t]he bulldozers that rolled across Lambeth at the behest of the planners had (for practical reasons) destroyed many good dwellings as well as bad’ (Cockburn, 1977, p. 76). ‘[R]un[ning] ahead of the capacity to rebuild,’ the bulldozers ‘left many acres of rubble that housed little but rats’ (Cockburn, 1977, p. 76). The houses which had not been demolished remained abandoned (Anning & Simpson, 1980; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). Similar dynamics played out in other areas of London. By 1971, Greater London contained 23,100 dwellings which had been left empty, pending demolition for similarly grandiose redevelopment schemes which were abandoned or repeatedly postponed due to budgetary problems (Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017; Kearns, 1979). In Lambeth, the council’s redevelopment plans were met with increasing opposition from people resenting the loss of their homes and their communities (Cockburn, 1977; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Piper, 1996). Due to this opposition and to concerns over the spiralling cost of the redevelopment programme, several areas around Brixton were spared demolition (Piper, 1996). The emphasis was – belatedly – placed on repairing the existing housing (Piper, 1996). Years of neglect, however, meant that the backlog of repairs was immense, and so large areas of housing remained vacant (Piper, 1996). During this period, Lambeth was in the top five of the 33 London boroughs in terms of vacant property rates, and had not only one of the largest populations of any of the thirty-two Greater London Boroughs but also the highest population density south of the Thames (Benson, 1981; London Borough of Lambeth, 1967). By 1974, one in every four households in the borough lived in a shared dwelling (Cockburn, 1977); by the end of the 1975 academic year, an estimated 1,000 school-leavers were living in overcrowded homes (Cockburn, 1977). Although the number of squatters in London as a whole had risen sharply by the mid-1970s (with an estimated 30,000 squatters by 1976), the

confluence of factors in Lambeth was such that it became one of the most heavily squatted boroughs in the city (with an estimated three thousand squatters by 1976) (Cockburn, 1977; Cook, 2013; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979; Piper, 1996; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017). It was in this context that the Brixton Gay Community emerged; it was also in this context that Brixton Black Women's Group co-founder Olive Morris became well-known for providing assistance to families and individuals by squatting vacant houses in order to move them in. The housing needs of single and childless people were often ignored by local authorities; single and childless people, finding themselves 'trapped at the bottom of the housing pile', increasingly resorted to squatting (Platt, 1980a, p. 99; Pettitt, 1980; Wates, 1980; Wates & Wolmar, 1980). 'Even elderly couples, West Indian people whose children had grown up and gone,' observed Cockburn, 'were desperate enough to be thinking of squatting' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 78). 'If you are 56 and your kids have reached 30,' one such couple told Cockburn, 'you won't get a flat out of Lambeth Council. You have missed the boat' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 78).

Negotiations, licenses, evictions and uprisings

On the 13th of December 1969, the South East London Squatters reached a breakthrough agreement with Lewisham Council, under which empty properties were licensed on a 'short-life' basis to a squatting campaign group which had occupied them, on the condition that they vacated the properties when required (Platt, 1980a). Due to the number of empty properties in the borough, Lewisham Council realised that if it did not reach an agreement with the South East London Squatters (thus gaining some control over the situation), they would squat those properties anyway (Platt, 1980a). The following year, the GLC gave four houses on licence to another squatting campaign group (Platt, 1980a). By the end of 1971, twelve London councils, including Lambeth, had (often grudgingly) reached similar agreements with squatting groups; by 1972, this number had grown to sixteen (Bailey, 1973; Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a; Reeve, 2009; Vasudevan, 2017). Initially, squatting campaign groups negotiated for councils to rehouse *families*, not squatters as a whole (Bowman, 2004). Thus, informal, uncoordinated squatting by single, childless people continued in ever-growing numbers, especially from 1972 onwards (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a).⁸ There had long been major disagreements among squatters with regard to objectives, ideologies and whether to negotiate with local authorities

⁸ According to ex-squatter and community housing organiser Steve Platt, from 1972 onwards the number of unlicensed squatters exceeded the number of licensed ones (Platt, 1980a).

'Short-life licensing'

'Short-life housing' – sometimes known as 'licensed squatting' – refers to the permitted short-term use of empty property owned by local authorities (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979). Initially compulsorily-purchased for redevelopment schemes, such empty properties were overwhelmingly in very poor condition and not up to the required standard for human habitation (and thus were unsuitable for officially housing those on councils' waiting lists) (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Goymour, 2015). Squatters were granted permission to remain in them if they constituted themselves as housing co-ops or housing associations (to which they then paid rent); further, squatters committed themselves to vacating the dwellings licensed to them when required to by local authorities (Blundy, 2014; Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979; Platt, 1980a). Short-life licenses were issued to housing co-operatives and associations in order to avoid creating official tenancies for inhabitants (which would have entailed tenants' rights for them); for Lambeth Council, this meant that it could retain the right to recover possession of the properties at relatively short notice should its redevelopment plans go ahead (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Goymour, 2015; Kearns, 1979; Reeve, 2009). Thus, writing in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in 1979, Kevin Kearns argued that such arrangements benefitted squatters by granting them security from sudden eviction, and benefitted local authorities by 'plac[ing] squatting in a quasilegal framework with some semblance of containment and regulation by authorities' (Kearns, 1979, p. 594). From the emergence of short-life licenses and into the 1990s, Lambeth was among the London boroughs with the highest numbers of short-life co-operative housing (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019).

By the time short-life licensing arrangements began to be made, there had long been heated debates among squatters with regard to a number of issues – for example, on whether to negotiate with local authorities; whether to focus on demanding housing for families or for anyone who needed a home; and whether squatting groups should focus on meeting housing need or challenging the notion of property ownership more generally (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a; Vasudevan, 2017). As more and more councils began granting short-life licenses, many squatters felt that opting for licensing betrayed the original principles of the squatting movement (Platt, 1980a). Further, it was argued that those who acquired council permission to live in the houses they had occupied were technically no longer squatters but rather licensees – a distinction some groups who acquired short-life licenses accepted, renaming themselves 'self-help housing' groups (Platt, 1980a, p. 29). Critics also pointed to the restrictive conditions short-life licenses entailed – for example, they were initially only granted to families (thus excluding single people without children) (Platt, 1980a). Supporters of short-life licenses reasoned that the security from eviction (however tenuous or temporary) that families gained from them should be seen as a victory; further, they argued, negotiating with local authorities did not preclude militant responses by squatters if local authorities failed to deliver on their promises (Platt, 1980a). Such differing stances emphasised growing divisions between 'responsible' family-focused groups and other squatters (who continued to face hostility and punitive measures) (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a). These deepening splits effectively led to the development of a 'dual movement' by the end of 1969 (Platt, 1980a, p. 27; Bowman, 2004). The popularisation of short-life licenses did not, by any means, put an end to *unlicensed* squatting – family squatting groups had long waiting lists of their own, and many single people without children continued to need housing (Platt, 1980a).^{*} This, coupled with large numbers of empty properties which councils were unwilling to license, meant that unlicensed squatting continued to grow (Platt, 1980a). Over time, short-life housing went from being a temporary arrangement to being a precarious long-term solution for many; this created difficulties for local authorities as long-term short-life inhabitants began to resist being moved on (Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019).

^{*} In subsequent years, however, squatters who remained less formally organised than family squatting groups did successfully negotiate the rehousing of single, childless people in short-life property (Bowman, 2004).

(Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a; Vasudevan, 2017). The introduction of short-life licenses deepened such splits. Significantly, granting licences to those considered to be the ‘deserving homeless’ (such as families) often gave local authorities opportunities to undermine popular support for single, childless, unlicensed squatters (Platt, 1980a, p. 29).

Although negotiations were often long and protracted and many in local government opposed making any deals with squatters on principle, the advantages that short-life licensing presented for councils came to be recognised (Platt, 1980a). The work done by licensees on their new, legitimised homes offered local authorities a cheaper way of repairing and often fully refurbishing otherwise vacant housing (Ferrerri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979). Councils also realised it was far cheaper to give squatting families short-life licenses to properties they were already occupying than it was to evict them and then having to provide them with temporary accommodation in bed-and-breakfast hotels (Platt, 1980a). ‘In the absence of any centrally-directed policy’, however, ‘the state’s response to squatting,’ according to ex-squatter and community housing organiser Steve Platt, ‘varied immensely between one area and another and even between different groups of squatters within the same area’ (Platt, 1980a, p. 27). In Lambeth, for example, although some groups administered the properties licensed to them efficiently and carried out repairs at no cost to the council, animosity on the part of the council towards them remained (Cockburn, 1977). Agreements were at times terminated abruptly – in large part, it seems, due to councillors’ concerns over the implications that squatting and short-life licensing presented with regard to private property (Cockburn, 1977). In April 1976, among a string of punitive measures, Lambeth Council embarked on an intensified campaign to evict unlicensed single, childless squatters – whom, unlike families with children, the council had no obligation to house (Cockburn, 1977; Platt, 1980a). To prevent further squatting, the council sent workmen to gut the interior of empty houses (Cockburn, 1977; Platt, 1980a). It also demolished more houses – admitting that it was doing so simply to get rid of squatters, as it still did not have funds to complete redevelopment schemes (and likely would not have them for another five years) (Cockburn, 1977; Platt, 1980a).⁹ Punitive measures were also being pursued against squatters more broadly throughout this period: In 1972, the Law Commission began work on a report which became the basis for the Criminal Law Act of 1977.

By 1977, the number of unlicensed squatters in GLC properties had reached an all-time high, with over 1,850 GLC properties occupied (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a). Realising it

⁹ See Cynthia Cockburn’s *The Local State: Management of Cities and People* (1977) and Platt’s ‘A whole new ball game’ (1980a) for a more detailed account of these measures.

would be impossible to evict the approximately 7,000 people living in these squats, on the 25th of October 1977 the GLC's leadership announced an amnesty and offered to legitimise the occupancy of every squatter in GLC premises, provided they registered for that purpose within a month (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017). The GLC's rationale was that this move was a step towards 'a restoration of law and order' and ending unlicensed squatting once and for all (Platt, 1980a, p. 89; Bowman, 2004). Once that one-month period came to an end, the GLC vowed, it would crack down on all those who did not register, as well as all future squatters (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a). Many argued that housing conditions which were acceptable to squatters were not necessarily acceptable if rent had to be paid for them (which legitimisation would entail) (Platt, 1980a). Still, the looming threat of the impending Criminal Law Act of 1977 proved to be a powerful incentive, and about 70% of eligible squatters accepted the GLC's offer (this amounted to 5,000 squatters in 1,300 GLC properties) (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980a).¹⁰ They were given permanent tenancies in 'hard-to-let' properties or short-life licences – sometimes in the homes they were already occupying (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017).¹¹ The GLC also allowed several squatter communities to form housing co-operatives (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017).¹² The majority of applicants, however, were re-housed in other GLC properties (Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017).

Although not on the same scale as prior to the GLC amnesty, there remained a considerable amount of unlicensed squatters in both GLC and non-GLC properties after the amnesty, and the GLC began its promised crackdown (Bowman, 2004; Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017). During this period, more efficient management of empty properties by local authorities led to a further expansion of short-life housing (Bowman, 2004). These factors, combined with the passing of the Criminal Law Act of 1977, meant that the vast majority of London squatting groups had folded or 'were moribund' by the end of 1979 (Platt, 1980b, p. 101; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017). By the mid-1980s, however, although 'the Left had dumped squatting as both a political project and as a practical solution to aspects of the housing crisis' (x-Chris, 2015, p. 117), a new generation of squatters emerged as the effects of

¹⁰ It was believed that the Criminal Law Act of 1977 would make squatting – in all instances – illegal; in anticipation of its passing, property owners as well as police began to evict squatters illegally (Platt, 1980a). As it turned out, although the Act did make squatting more difficult, it did not, in fact, make it illegal (Bowman, 2004).

¹¹ These were council properties that families on councils' waiting lists had consistently turned down, and which were then leased to childless people on a first-come, first-served or ballot basis (Platt, 1980a; Wall, 2017).

¹² According to Platt, however, '[e]ach co-op had to be fought for' (Platt, 1980a, p. 91). Co-ops which were successfully established owed this not to the GLC's generosity but practical budgetary considerations. '[A]t a time of cut-backs' Platt argues, the establishment of co-ops occasionally 'presented cheap alternatives to councils' (Platt, 1980a, p. 91). Some attempts to establish co-ops, he observed, 'failed when the GLC found it could make more money by selling the houses' (Platt, 1980a, p. 91).

government cuts to public spending became ever more widely felt (Platt, 1980b; Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017).

By the 1980s, Brixton had long been, in the popular imagination, ‘a name synonymous with poverty and its attendant social problems’ (Benson, 1981, p. 24). During this period, across the country, a refusal to accept ‘unemployment, bad housing, police provocation and the institutional and individual racism inherent in British society’ (Ramdin, 2017 [1987], p. 367; Benyon & Solomos, 1988) led to a series of large-scale confrontations between non-white youth and the police (Fryer, 2010 [1984]; Lanning, 1981; Purbrick & Schofield, 2009; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).¹³ In Brixton, saturation policing and the stop-and-searching of Black people were routine; these were the driving factors behind the confrontation which took place in the area between the 10th and 12th of April 1981 (Benyon & Solomos, 1988; Jackson, 2015; Waters, 2019). Another contributing factor was the death of 13 young Black people in a fire at a house in nearby Deptford in January 1981, and the fallout from that tragedy (Fisher, 2012; Lanning, 1981; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). Although Black homes in Deptford had been attacked by fascists and a Black community centre in the area had been burned down, police dismissed the possibility that the fire in January might have been started by fascists (Fisher, 2012; Fryer, 2010 [1984]). Three months later, around 15,000 Black people marched across London condemning the police’s inquiry into the fire (Fisher, 2012; Fryer, 2010 [1984]). In what many saw as a response to that march, at the beginning of April 1981 police launched an operation code-named ‘Swamp 81’ – as part of which, over six days, police stopped-and-searched 943 people in Brixton, arresting 118 of them (Fisher, 2012; Fryer, 2010 [1984]; Jackson, 2015; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]; Waters, 2019). Beatings accompanied the stops and arrests, and homes and cafés were also raided (Fisher, 2012; Purbrick & Schofield, 2009). Several skirmishes with the police broke out over the first few days of ‘Swamp 81’; large-scale confrontations erupted on the fourth day, the 10th of April (Figure 4-4) (Fryer, 2010 [1984]; Waters, 2019). The following 15th of July, raids by 176 police officers (with a further 391 in reserve) on eleven houses on Railton Road (ostensibly due to petrol bombs and unlawful drinking on the premises, evidence of neither of which was found) led to more clashes (Benyon & Solomos, 1988; Waters, 2019)¹⁴. Another major confrontation took place between the 28th and the 30th of

¹³ From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, as well as in Brixton and London’s Southall, confrontations took place in Bristol, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester and Liverpool (Benyon & Solomos, 1988; Fryer, 2010 [1984]; Lanning, 1981; Purbrick & Schofield, 2009; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). Although these confrontations are commonly referred to as ‘riots’, the terms ‘uprisings’ and ‘rebellions’ are also used (Fryer, 2010 [1984]; Lanning, 1981; Purbrick & Schofield, 2009; Ramdin, 2017 [1987]).

¹⁴ The houses raided sustained considerable damage, with windows, sinks, toilets, floorboards, furniture and televisions smashed (Benyon & Solomos, 1988). The Metropolitan Police paid £8,500 in compensation for structural damage, with further sums paid for damage to personal property (Benyon & Solomos, 1988).



Figure 4-4: Coldharbour Lane during the Brixton uprising of 1981 (Hoffman, 1981). The building with the ‘Woolworth’ sign was squatted by the House of Brag in 2014 in order to hold the fourth iteration of the London Queer Social Centre.

September 1985, following an early-morning police raid on the home of Brixton resident Dorothy ‘Cherry’ Groce in search of her 21-year-old son, Michael (BBC News, 2014; Benyon & Solomos, 1988; Dangerfield, 2014; Press Association, 2014; Waters, 2019). Groce was shot in her bedroom in front of her 11-year-old son, Lee (one of four children in the house when the raid took place); as a result of being shot, she was permanently paralysed from the waist down (BBC News, 2014; Benyon & Solomos, 1988; Dangerfield, 2014; Press Association, 2014; Waters, 2019).¹⁵

In the face of appalling conditions and oppression, however, Brixton’s residents continued to make it a culturally and politically thriving area. According to writer, musician and filmmaker Carol Leeming, Brixton was home to ‘the most amazing Black artists of that time’ (SuAndi, et al., 2017, p. 140). ‘I remember thinking that I was in something like a Harlem Renaissance,’ she recalled (SuAndi, et al., 2017, p. 140). There were, according to her, ‘sculptors and photographers, fashion designers, and choreographers,’ as well as ‘openings,

¹⁵ Groce died in April 2011, from an illness which a pathologist directly linked to the gunshot injury she sustained (BBC News, 2014; Dangerfield, 2014; Press Association, 2014). Douglas Lovelock, the officer who shot her, was cleared by a jury in 1987 of all criminal charges in connection to the shooting (BBC News, 2014; Dangerfield, 2014; Press Association, 2014). In the course of a 2014 inquest into Groce’s death, a jury found there were eight failures made by police in connection to her shooting – these included failing to call off the raid (as Michael Groce was no longer wanted in connection with the robbery which triggered the raid) and failing to adequately observe Groce’s home (thus carrying out the raid when there were four children present) (BBC News, 2014; Dangerfield, 2014; Press Association, 2014).

launches, and gigs every week’ (SuAndi, et al., 2017, p. 140). ‘[I]t was ‘a social and political scene that was absolutely incredible’, she stated in 2017 (SuAndi, et al., 2017, p. 140). Perhaps as an unintended result of this effervescence, processes of gentrification were set in motion. As quoted by psychological and behavioural science scholar Caroline Howarth, a 1987 *Mail on Sunday* article stated that although ‘Brixton has a name as a savage and brutal place’, it was ‘fast becoming the smartest address in London’ (Howarth, 2002, p. 239).

In 1993, Lambeth received funding for a regeneration scheme from the Department of the Environment (Mavrommatis, 2010). The resulting scheme, Brixton City Challenge, ran between 1993 and 1998 (Mavrommatis, 2010). Its chief aim was to generate private investment, which would then, it was argued, trickle down to the local population (Mavrommatis, 2010). The scheme’s ‘free-market approach to regeneration with minimum community participation’ was, according to George Mavrommatis, ‘accused of actively evicting local populations by promoting and facilitating gentrification’ (Mavrommatis, 2010, p. 571). The scheme did not improve conditions for Brixton’s long-term residents (Howarth, 2002). By the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Brixton ranked as the seventh most deprived local authority district in England, out of 354 (Howarth, 2002). Many homes in the area still had no inside toilet, no shower and/or no central heating (Howarth, 2002). Still, by the late 1990s, house prices in Brixton were among the highest in south London (Howarth, 2002).

Although Brixton’s ‘multicultural character’ was deployed by the Brixton City Challenge scheme as one of the area’s key selling points (the scheme’s slogan, borrowing from a Benetton advertising campaign, was ‘The United Colours of Brixton’) (Mavrommatis, 2010; Mavrommatis, 2011), it remained the focus of fevered racist anxieties. On the 17th of April 1999, a nail bomb planted by neo-Nazi David Copeland exploded in Brixton Market (Dearden, 2019; Hopkins, 2000). As quoted in an online *Independent* article, Copeland hoped to ‘set fire to the country and stir up a racial war’ (Dearden, 2019). He chose Brixton, according to an online article in the *Guardian*, as ‘he believed [it] to be the heart of London’s black community’ (Hopkins, 2000).¹⁶ More broadly, across the UK, the 1990s brought a wave of autonomous, direct-action political organising (Blunt & Wills, 2000). Characteristic of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘DIY’ (Do It Yourself) culture of late 1990s England, such organising focused on protecting the environment, resisting the arms industry, defending animal rights, opposing road-building, challenging land ownership and securing housing (Blunt & Wills, 2000, p. 29;

¹⁶ One week after the explosion in Brixton, on the 24th of April, another bomb placed by Copeland detonated in east London’s Brick Lane (Dearden, 2019; Hopkins, 2000). A final bomb place by him hit the Admiral Duncan pub in London’s Soho on the 30th of April (Hopkins, 2000). He targeted Brick Lane and Soho as Asian and LGBTQ areas, respectively (Hopkins, 2000). Copeland’s bombs, in total, killed three people and injured at least 139 (Dearden, 2019).

Eleftheriadis, 2015). Much of this organising was, at least initially, in response to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill introduced on the 11th of January 1994, which became the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (Howard, 1994). Contained within the Act's clauses were increased police stop and search powers, substantial changes to the traditional right to silence, and criminal sanctions against squatters, travellers, ravers, public assemblies and protests. Squats in Brixton were crucial organising sites for political activity during this period.¹⁷ Over time, the CJA and the political climate it fostered took a heavy toll on Brixton's squatters, and squatters in London more broadly (see Chapter 7). Squatting in London declined; what remained of the city's squatting scene in the late 1990s and into early 2000s became firmly embedded within the anarchist strands of the then-rising alterglobalization movement (Brown, 2007; Vasudevan, 2017). The effects of the global financial crisis that began in 2008, however, led to a resurgence of squatting explicitly as part of a struggle for housing in the city (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017).

Austerity, displacement and a 'profit-making culture'

Changes in local government policy throughout the 1990s and 2000s (following the abolition of the GLC in 1986 and the passing of the Local Government and Housing Act of 1989) meant that the residents of (the formerly squatted) short-life housing co-operatives established in the 1970s and 1980s were left in a long-term 'precarious limbo' (Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019, p. 169; Bowman, 2004).¹⁸ With a view to selling all of the short-life properties in the borough to raise funds in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, in 2009 Lambeth Council issued 'Notices to Quit' to many short-life co-op residents (Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). Some of

¹⁷ For example, a now-famous 1998 Reclaim the Streets street party in Brixton was organised entirely out of local squats. An anti-car, radical direct action '*disorganisation*' (Brown, 2004, pp. 91-92, emphasis in original), Reclaim the Streets (RTS) formed in London in the autumn of 1991, when a small group of environmentalists, anarchists and anti-capitalists set out to campaign 'FOR walking cycling and cheap, or free, public transport, and AGAINST cars, roads and the system that pushes them' (Bailie, 1997, p. 1; Urban, 2013a). RTS became known for organising street parties and road-blocks to challenge 'car culture' as well as the 'atomized alienation of capitalist society' (Brown, 2004, p. 91; British Library, n.d.; Urban, 2013a). On 6 June 1998, RTS protesters sealed off Brixton Road by staging two car crashes – one opposite Brixton Town Hall, the other in the vicinity of Atlantic Road and Stockwell Road. Flares were set off, protestors hung colourful banners from lamp posts and sound systems were set up (Urban, 2013a; urban75, 1998). An estimated 5,000 revellers took over Brixton Road (Transpontine, 2018; urban75, 1998). Photos and video footage of this action can be seen at <http://www.brixtonbuzz.com/2013/10/brixton-reclaim-the-streets-party-archive-photos-and-video-footage-6th-june-1998/> (Urban, 2013a) and <http://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.com/2018/06/reclaim-streets-brixton-party-june-2018.html> (Transpontine, 2018). The planning meetings for the Brixton action were held in a squat at 91 Kennington Lane (which now houses the North Lambeth Housing Office) (Transpontine, 2018). One week before the RTS action, the squatted 121 Centre hosted an RTS benefit gig; leaflets to be distributed at the action were also printed at the 121 Centre (Transpontine, 2018). The leaflets featured a south London radical history map, as well as a list of 'some things to do in south London' – the anarcho-queer collective AnarQuist (see Chapter 8) was included in this list, and was described as 'Radical queer activists who put on parties and put out a zine' (Transpontine, 2018).

¹⁸ See Anna Bowman's *Interim spaces: Reshaping London – The role of short life property, 1970 to 2000* (2004) for a detailed outline of these changes.

them had under 30 days to leave their homes of more than 30 years; many found it hard to access other housing options (Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). The same year, a redevelopment strategy report commissioned by Lambeth Council identified Brixton's markets as a key part of its proposed strategy to develop Brixton's 'mid or upper market potential', up from its standing at 'the lower end of the market' (Stock Woolstencroft, BioRegional and Lambert Smith Hampton, 2009, p. 28). An ambitious regeneration scheme was launched, even though, as the report itself noted, Brixton's markets 'continue[d] to provide goods and services to the local community' (Stock Woolstencroft, BioRegional and Lambert Smith Hampton, 2009, p. 30). Granville Arcade – long a hub of Afro-Caribbean businesses – was thus rebranded as 'Brixton Village', with a new focus on cafes, delis, bars and restaurants (one of which, Champagne + Fromage, was the focus of anti-gentrification protests) (Historic England, 2010; Lubbock, 2013). From the beginning of this initiative, Granville Arcade's long-standing retailers protested that the refurbishment was leading to an increase in their rents, and that this was part of a plan by Lambeth Council to force them out altogether (Nettleford, 2013). 'Brixton Village' became, for many, emblematic of a rapidly and ruthlessly gentrifying Brixton (Bennhold, 2014; Nettleford, 2013; Steele, 2013).

As a new decade began, the UK's Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-2015 began rolling out severe cuts to public expenditure in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, as a direct result of which destitution, eviction and homelessness have affected an increasing number of people (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Vasudevan, 2017). Against this background, following the fatal police shooting of Mark Duggan on August 4th 2011, a series of what are commonly referred to as 'riots' took place in cities across England between the 6th and 11th of August 2011 (Lewis, et al., 2011).¹⁹ In London, 22 out of the 32 boroughs – including Lambeth – were affected in 'disturbances' the Metropolitan Police described as 'unprecedented in the capital's history' (Lewis, et al., 2011, p. 17). Confrontations began in Brixton on the 7th of August (Lewis, et al., 2011) A study by the LSE and the *Guardian* found that, as in the 1980s, long-simmering anger at the police's behaviour – especially the police's continued racialised use of stop-and-search – was a significant factor everywhere confrontations took place (Lewis, et al., 2011). Many of those who participated in the 'disturbances' also identified a lack of employment, poverty, increases in tuition fees as the closure of youth services as contributing factors (Lewis, et al., 2011). Against this background,

¹⁹ Protests started in north London's Tottenham area, where Mark Duggan lived and was killed (Lewis, et al., 2011). Between the 8th and 10th of August, such 'disturbances' also took place in Birmingham, Bristol, Coventry, Derby, Gloucester, Huddersfield, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Salford, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton (Lewis, et al., 2011).



Figure 4-5: Protesters gathering outside Lambeth Town Hall on Saturday 25th April 2015, having broken off from the 'Reclaim Brixton' demonstration against gentrification, displacement, a lack of affordable homes, the closure of long-established local businesses and police racism (Ive & Bethell, 2015). Shortly after, one of the shop-front windows of the Brixton branch of estate agent Foxtons was smashed; 'Yuppies out' and 'No evictions' were spray-painted across the estate agent's other shop-front window (Akbar, 2015; BBC News, 2015; McKie, 2015).

the government passed, on the 1st of September 2012, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act of 2012 (LASPOA) (Vasudevan, 2017; Weatherley, 2012). It introduced clauses reducing or withdrawing the use of government funds to provide legal aid in a variety of circumstances, thus preventing hundreds of thousands of people from pursuing justice in areas such as housing, employment, family, clinical negligence, immigration and education (Bowcott, et al., 2018; Manjikian, 2013; Schling, 2013; Vasudevan, 2017; Weatherley, 2012). The LASPOA also criminalised, for the first time, squatting in a residential building (including vacant buildings) (Nowicki, 2017). It was in this context that the House of Brag formed, opening its first social centre six weeks after the passing of the LASPOA.

In Lambeth, austerity measures have seen a 60% reduction in central government contributions to the council's capital budget since 2010, prompting Lambeth Council to intensify the sale of its remaining short-life properties as a means to generate revenue (Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). As a result, '[r]esidents across the borough' as reported in the *Evening Standard* online, were 'being evicted every month' (Blundy, 2014). Many of Brixton's residents mobilised in protest (Figure 4-5). The situation was such that a Lambeth Council policy officer denounced the 'profit-making culture' pervading the council (Blundy, 2014).

Throughout this period, a number of violent squat evictions also took place: that of 22 long-term squatted flats in Clifton Mansions on July 12th 2011, of six blocks of long-squatted flats in Rushcroft Road on July 5th 2013 (Figure 4-6), and of the former Walton Lodge laundry, after a short occupation, on April 23rd 2015 (Childs & Lewis, 2013; Köksal, 2013; Urban, 2015a).²⁰ All were converted into luxury apartments by the Lexadon Property Group (Lexadon, 2013; Lexadon, 2015; Lexadon, 2019).

More broadly, at present, a number of housing estates in Brixton are threatened with or undergoing demolition and redevelopment – which has entailed sharp decreases in the number of flats available at social rent in them (and a concomitant sharp increase in the number of privately-owned flats) (Boughton, 2018; Gallagher, 2015; Hodkinson & Essen, 2015; Williams, 2015). The inhabitants of these estates (many of whom question the council’s claims about the reasons why redevelopment is needed) are facing or experiencing dispossession and displacement (Boughton, 2018; Gallagher, 2015; Hodkinson & Essen, 2015; Williams, 2015). Meanwhile, the effects of Network Rail’s plan to sell off all 4,455 publicly-owned railway arches in England and Wales began to be felt in Brixton when, in February 2015, Network Rail announced that it would terminate the leases of about 30 traders based in the arches beneath Brixton Railway Station (Evans, 2018; Gayle, 2016; White, 2018).²¹ Parallel to this, house prices in Brixton surged by 45% between November 2012 and May 2014; the number of evictions of residents unable to pay rising rents also grew during this period (Bennhold, 2014). Against this background, Katherine Wells – sales manager at the Clapham and Brixton branch of estate agent Kinleigh, Folkard & Hayward – told the *Financial Times* in 2013, ‘You can’t get a house [in Brixton] for less than £750,000 now really, or a flat for less than £300,000’ (Steele, 2013). Brixton’s histories of resistance and squatting are now touted as selling points

²⁰ In the 1990s, Clifton Mansions was a dilapidated block of 22 council flats in Brixton’s Coldharbour Lane; squatters turned the 22 flats not only into living spaces, but also into an arts, music and cultural centre for two decades (Nesbitt, 2013; Schling, 2013). Per a Freedom of Information request, evicting the Clifton Mansion squats cost Lambeth Council £380,875 (Boehnert, 2012; Schling, 2013). It was subsequently revealed that Lambeth Council had not sold the building prior to evicting the people living in it (Morrison, 2011). Instead, the council paid Camelot, a private security company, £63,976 to make the flats habitable for its live-in ‘property guardians’ until they were sold (Boehnert, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Schling, 2013). The council then continued paying Camelot up to £1,650 per month to rent out the 22 flats at 80% of the market rate to its ‘property guardians’ – whose rent went to Camelot, and who were, like ‘property guardians’ more broadly, effectively tenants paying to live without any tenancy rights in previously squatted properties (Boehnert, 2012; Schling, 2013). By March 2012, Lambeth Council had paid £66,596 to Camelot in repair costs and monthly fees (Boehnert, 2012). The building was converted into luxury apartments by property developers Lexadon (Nesbitt, 2013; SW9, 2013; Schling, 2013).

²¹ Network Rail justified terminating the leases of the traders in the arches beneath Brixton Railway Station by arguing that the year-long, £8 million redevelopment project that would begin when the traders had vacated the arches was a vital necessity, and promised the evicted traders a right to return once the work was completed (Evans, 2018; Gayle, 2016). Based on similar Network Rail projects elsewhere in London, however, campaigners argued that returning traders would likely see a three-fold increase in their rent (Evans, 2018; #SAVEBRIXTONARCHES, 2015). The plan met with fierce resistance in Brixton from traders and other locals (Evans, 2018; Gayle, 2016; #SAVEBRIXTONARCHES, 2015; White, 2018). As reported online by the *Guardian*, the primary reason Lambeth Council gave for supporting Network Rail’s plan was that the existing shopfronts were ‘detrimental to the appearance of the Brixton conservation area’ (Gayle, 2016). As of September 2019, only nine of the original 39 businesses remain in the arches (Minton, 2019).

by property developers – with the Lexadon Property Group, for example, boasting that Clifton Mansions (one of its redevelopment projects) is ‘renowned for being squatted in from the early 1990’s [sic] housing a diverse community of squatters including celebs. [sic] such as Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller and folk-punk band The Pogues’ (Lexadon, 2013). ‘[T]he property of Brixton’, Wells told the *Financial Times*, ‘perpetuates that feeling that you are buying into something edgy’ (Steele, 2013).



Figure 4-6: Eviction of squats on Rushcroft Road on the 5th of July 2013 (Childs & Lewis, 2013).

ASIDE: *Rushcroft Road*

Rushcroft Road consists of mansion blocks built in the 1890s to house the artists and technicians of Brixton’s music halls (Goymour, 2015). All of the flats in these blocks were purchased for demolition by Lambeth Council in 1975, as part of its redevelopment scheme (Goymour, 2015). With the plan abandoned, the vacant flats fell into disrepair, becoming ‘almost worthless’ (Goymour, 2015, p. 154; Schling, 2013). In the early 1980s, squatters moved in and carried out repairs (Schling, 2013). In the middle of the decade, many of the squatted flats became part of short-life housing co-ops (Goymour, 2015; Nesbitt, 2013). Lambeth Council granted a short-life license (and the management of some of the flats and housing co-ops) to the London and Quadrant Housing Trust (LQHT), to which the short-life residents paid rent (Goymour, 2015; Nesbitt, 2013; Sabin, 2015; Schling, 2013; Urban, 2015b). Some residents remained as squatters; together with the newly-licensed residents, they built a thriving community (Goymour, 2015; Schling, 2013).

According to a resident, however, ‘[LQHT] never carried out any meaningful maintenance on the properties’, and so many of them ‘deteriorated shockingly’ (Casabon, 2009). One resident took the Trust to court in 1995, arguing that although his housing agreement was technically a license, it was, in effect, a tenancy – and therefore LQHT, as his landlord, was responsible for carrying out repairs to his flat (Goymour, 2015). The intricacies of this case have been parsed by legal scholar Amy Goymour (2015); what is relevant here is that Lambeth Council’s mishandling of the affair over decades enabled LQHT to, in the words of a former resident, react ‘by simply running away’, renouncing all responsibility (Casabon, 2009). The council, fearful of being held responsible for expensive repairs, terminated the

licences of the approximately 75 licensed residents, serving them with eviction notices in 2000 (Goymour, 2015; Schling, 2013). The council refused to accept rent from them, as doing so would have established tenancies (Casabon, 2009; Schling, 2013). With nowhere to go, many residents stayed, as squatters once again (Schling, 2013).

On the 10th of March 2009, two of the long-squatted blocks were evicted (Casabon, 2009). Six others – those which had had licenses – remained squatted until July 5th, 2013, when the residents were violently evicted by bailiffs and police (Figure 4-6) (Childs & Lewis, 2013; Köksal, 2013).* The *Daily Mail* trumpeted Lambeth Council's statement that it had not received rent for the flats since 2000, without mentioning that it had refused rent in order to avoid landlord responsibilities (Ledwith, 2013). Lambeth Council declared that it would sell three of the blocks to fund the conversion of three others into social housing (Goymour, 2015; Schling, 2013). 'The irony of evicting 75 people to make way for a smaller quantity of social housing,' noted commentator Hannah Schling, 'is palpable' (Schling, 2013).

*Section 144 of the LASPOA 2012 did not apply in this case, as squatters in these flats had initially had licences (Köksal, 2013).

Chapter 5 / ‘...Their Own Self-Contained, Self-Defined Space’: The squatted Brixton Gay Community and Negotiations of Race, Gender and Sexuality, 1974–1984

Introduction

To invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and of power.

Miranda Joseph (2002, p. xxiii)

In the 1980s and 1990s, Ian Townson, a former Brixton squatter, worked on writing a book about the South London Gay Liberation Front, the South London Gay Community Centre, and what became known in the 1970s as the Brixton Gay Community (BGC). Townson had himself lived in squats in the BGC. 159 Railton Road, the first house in what became the BGC, was squatted in 1974, as was the South London Gay Community Centre (in a since-demolished shop at 78 Railton Road) (Figure 5-1) (Cook, 2013; urban75, 2012a). The Centre’s presence then attracted more gay men, who squatted houses in the area; over time, ten or so houses were squatted by gay men on Railton Road (between numbers 153 and 159 in some accounts, although some also include numbers 143 and 145) and the parallel Mayall Road (between numbers 146 and 152) (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Cook, 2013; mudlark121, 2018; urban75, 2012a).¹ Although the Centre was evicted in 1976, the houses remained squatted for almost 10 years (Cook, 2013). Townson wrote and re-wrote several drafts of his book, wrestling with how to write a history of the BGC. In hand-written notes on one of his drafts, a question stands out: ‘Is a gay community possible?’ This question became one of the working titles of Townson’s book. It was posed not just with regard to the BGC, but also in terms of what being gay and what community meant, more broadly – points of tension which this chapter explores.

As noted in Chapter 2, while it has long been observed that squatting has enabled people to engage in often deeply transformative and explicitly political experiments with communal

¹ Kate Webb’s account (2019) of living in the BGC complicates accounts that place its Railton Road squats between numbers 153 and 159. According to her, she lived in a since-demolished squatted house which was part of the BGC and located at 143 Railton Road (Webb, 2019). As will be made clear in this chapter, this is not the only way in which her account of living in the BGC complicates prevalent narratives of it. In a 1997 interview, ‘Henry’ (a pseudonym), another of the BGC squatters, also remembered that 143 Railton Road was part of the BGC; he did not, however, make any mention of Webb or the other women who lived in BGC squats (‘Henry’, 1997). Henry also noted that he and three other BGC squatters lived at 145 Railton Road (‘Henry’, 1997).



Figure 5-1: The shop in which the South London Gay Community Centre was located, at 78 Railton Road, has since been demolished. As shown by this juxtaposition of an archival photo of the Centre with a Google Street View screenshot, the Centre stood in what is now the front courtyard of Brixton's St George's Residences (Google, 2019b; Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014).

living, the specific dynamics of these experiments and of how these communities were enacted remain largely under-explored in literature on squatting in England. It is for the most part only very recently that the negotiations at stake in squatted communities and projects have begun to be explored (Brown, 2007; Cook, 2013; Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b; Wall, 2017). This chapter draws on and builds on these interventions; in particular, it revisits historian Matt Cook's ground-breaking work on the Brixton Gay Community in order to expand on and spatialise dynamics around politics, communal subjectivities, race, gender and sexuality (Cook, 2013; Cook, 2014).

As will become clear, the geographies of Brixton established in Chapter 4 meant that there was an abundance of adjacent empty houses available to be squatted; this enabled the BGC's inhabitants to come together, live communally, assert themselves publicly and develop a collective politicised identity and project. It permitted them to establish themselves as a politically radical gay community in opposition to what they saw as apolitical gay scenes elsewhere in London. Squatting neighbouring houses meant that the BGC's inhabitants were able to actively adapt their built environment and create communal spaces.

In what follows, I interrogate some of the ways in which the squatted territory of the BGC was implicitly and explicitly demarcated along boundaries of race, gender and sexuality. I argue although the BGC was formed in the context of a political project to radically interrogate hegemonic understandings and categories of gender and sexuality in the service of creating a more fluid, ‘gender-free’ society, boundaries between specific formulations of ‘gay’ and other gendered and queer identities and positions were, in practice, often rigidly enforced in terms of the territory of the BGC. Further, I propose that some of the BGC squatters understood what being gay meant – and thus bordered the territory of the BGC – in ways that were often racialised and centred on whiteness. In spatialising the terms, identifications, politics and exclusions through which the BGC was assembled, built and demarcated, this chapter insists on the co-constitution of the spatial and the political.

I draw primarily on transcripts of four sets of semi-structured oral history interviews with former members of the BGC. The first set of interviews were gathered by Jamie Hall (who was one of the squatters) and Bill Thornycroft (who did not live in the squats but was very much a part of the community) in 1983 and 1984. They were transcribed by Townson. The second set of interviews were conducted and transcribed by Townson himself in 1996 and 1997, in the course of writing his book. Some men, who were no longer living in the United Kingdom when Townson was conducting interviews, sent Townson written accounts of their time in the BGC – I also draw on these. These two sets of interviews and written accounts are part of the collection of material that Townson donated to the LSE Library’s Hall-Carpenter Archives. The third set of interviews were conducted by Cook in 2008, in the course of researching his 2013 *Twentieth Century British History* article ‘‘Gay Times’’: Identity, Locality, Memory, and the Brixton Squats in 1970’s London’ (Cook, 2013), which he later expanded into a chapter in his book *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Cook, 2014).² I re-read these sets of interviews with a focus on how the territory of the BGC was demarcated by the men who lived there, and in light of the interviews I myself conducted with four inhabitants of the BGC between 2015 and 2017. I also draw on two films: Ron Peck’s autobiographical narrative *Strip Jack Naked* (1991) and Taha Hassan’s documentary *Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting* (2014). Lastly, I visited Lambeth Archives to examine Lambeth’s electoral registers from 1970 to 1995, in order to ascertain the location of ‘Pearl’s shebeen’, an illegal bar against which the boundaries of the BGC were negotiated by some of its inhabitants. In what follows, I have given pseudonyms to

² Cook generously shared the transcripts of these interviews with me, for which I am very grateful.

all the men whose interview transcripts and written recollections I draw on, in order to safeguard their privacy (I do, however, make clear which archives these were sourced from in my bibliography). I have also anonymised archival photographs I use here, as it is unclear whether some of the people featured in them consented to their being archived and deployed. When drawing on material which was *explicitly*, from the beginning, produced with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved to be made publicly available and widely circulated (such as both of the films I draw on), I have not anonymised names or images.

Geographies of sexualities, squatting in London and the Brixton Gay Community

Geographies of urban sexualities have long focused on gay ‘villages’, ‘ghettoes’, ‘districts’ or ‘gaybourhoods’ (Brown, 2014; Brown & Browne, 2016). Although these terms sometimes designate distinct spatial formations, they broadly refer to urban areas where gay men (and, to a lesser extent, lesbians, bisexuals, queers and trans and gender-non-conforming people) have claimed territories by frequenting and/or establishing bars, clubs, shops and homes (Brown, 2014; Browne & Brown, 2016; Goh, 2018; Knee, 2019). Although ‘gaybourhoods’ are only one example of the ways in which LGBTQ people make claims on urban space, ‘the gay village’, as Julie Podmore notes, ‘has arguably become the most persistent object of study on sexuality in the city’ (Podmore, 2013, p. 265; Brown, 2014). Although there is a growing literature on the lives of urban lesbians, bisexuals and trans people, geographies of urban sexualities remain focused on ‘gaybourhoods’ and the gay male identities lived through them to such an extent that the study of urban sexualities is often conflated with the study of gay neighbourhoods – especially those in North American and European cities (Brown, et al., 2016; Browne & Brown, 2016; Goh, 2018; Held, 2017).

Studies of ‘gaybourhoods’ have often emphasised ‘the importance of proximity and territory in establishing collective identities’ (Browne & Brown, 2016, p. 6) as well as ‘autonomy and safety for gay men’ (Brown, 2014, p. 458). Collectivity, autonomy and safety in such territories has long been unevenly distributed, however. Since the early 2000s, scholarship on ‘gaybourhoods’ has also examined the exclusions through which such territories are formed, noting that many people of colour, trans and gender non-conforming people, poor people, disabled people, lesbians, bisexuals and migrants face exclusion and marginalisation in ‘gaybourhoods’ and other ‘supposedly inclusive’ spaces (Browne & Brown, 2016, p. 6; Brown, 2014; Brown, et al., 2016; Hanhardt, 2013; Held, 2017; Hemmings, 2002; Nash, 2011;

Nero, 2005). Still, as Nina Held has noted, ‘the racialisation of lesbian and gay spaces in the UK have only been marginally explored’ in this literature (Held, 2015, p. 34).

In exploring the exclusions and inequities on which ‘gaybourhoods’ are often built, much of this literature draws on Lisa Duggan’s (2002) concept of ‘homonormativity’. This concept has been very generative with regard to teasing out the ways in which many LGBTQ subjects have pursued assimilationist politics that actively uphold ‘neo-liberal capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and racism’ (Podmore, 2013, p. 264). Although such critiques remain vital, some geographers have cautioned that ‘an analytical focus on homonormativity not only recentralizes the populations and spaces that are most empowered in our analysis [and] strips critical research of the geographical specificity embedded in these relations’ (Podmore, 2013, p. 264) but also risks creating a simplistic binary between ‘homonormative’ and ‘radical’ queer subjects and spaces (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2012; Brown & Browne, 2016; Oswin, 2004; Oswin, 2008; Podmore, 2013). Engaging with the self-consciously politically ‘radical’ BGC is thus an opportunity to explore territorial tensions and exclusions beyond commercial and ‘homonormative’ ‘gayborhoods’.

In its attention to spaces beyond commercial ‘gayborhoods’ and its touching on the racialisation of a gay community in England, Cook’s work on the BGC is a valuable contribution to the literatures outlined above. Exploring the BGC squatters’ attempts to ‘create home differently’ (Cook, 2013, p. 85), Cook considers the inclusions and exclusions at stake in attempts to create liberatory political communities. He is attentive to the complex ways in which sexuality, as a ground for identity and community, is entwined with issues of race, class and gender – indeed, he devotes particular attention to dynamics around class, noting that ‘middle-class assumptions[,] mores ... [and] cultures ... (especially when not quite realized or articulated) ... in part modulated a sense of who was “in” and who was “out”’ in the BGC (Cook, 2013, pp. 95-96). Some of the issues he identifies, however, merit further scrutiny. Here, I reconsider some of the tensions and exclusions around race, gender and sexuality which he explores, albeit from different angles and with different emphases.

Cook touches on the fact that the BGC was ‘specifically and deliberately a gay male community at a point when there was a considerable focus on what being gay meant’ (Cook, 2013, p. 96). He notes that although women lived there at different points, this was a source of tension, as was the fact that some of the men in the Community had relationships with women. ‘Whilst aspirationally there was a commitment to the idea of a fluidity in association and in categories of gender and sexuality,’ Cook writes, ‘there was also in practice a separatism’ (Cook, 2013, pp. 96-97). Here, I focus on this separatism in more depth. I contextualise it in

terms of the explicitly ‘gender-bending’ politics of the GLF and the BGC, note specific dynamics through which it was enacted, and investigate particular exclusions and negotiations in some of the squatters’ understandings of gender and sexuality (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). In doing so, I examine how these understandings and exclusions implicitly and explicitly demarcated the territory of the BGC.

Cook also argues that although ‘relations between the squatters and the local Afro-Caribbean community’ were ‘generally cordial,’ there was, however, ‘a sense of distance’ and the BGC squats ‘remained almost exclusively white’ (Cook, 2013, pp. 97-98). He touches briefly on prevalent images of Black queer men, as produced by both (non-Black) queers and heterosexuals, which serve to exclude Black queer men from many queer cultures. He also notes that there was a queer scene in Brixton that was predominantly Black, astutely observing that the ‘dimensions of gay identity’ that were operative in the BGC at that time might have felt ‘inaccessible or unrelated to local black queer experience’ (Cook, 2013, p. 99). Revisiting the ‘sense of distance’ between the squatters and the local Afro-Caribbean community, I argue that many of the BGC squatters understood what being gay meant – and thus implicitly delineated the territory of the BGC – in ways that were often racialised and centred on whiteness. This is a dynamic that Cook has addressed more explicitly later on, in Hassan’s 2014 documentary; in this chapter, I explore in more detail particular ways in which the BGC’s inhabitants negotiated the boundaries of the BGC in relation to ‘Pearl’s shebeen’ and Black queer men more broadly.

Some of the issues, tensions and exclusions explored here have been raised by the squatters themselves. As one of the squatters noted, ‘there are so many differences between what has just been lumped together as a gay community ... It was split more along class lines and racial lines and all kinds of things’ (‘Alex’, 1997, p. 11). In many cases, however, although the squatters raised some of these issues, they often did not engage with them further. This is especially true with regard to issues of race.

In my revisiting of the BGC, I take up Charles I. Nero’s still urgent call to think in more ‘complicated ways about the intersection of race and homosexuality ... as a factor in creating a white and male gay ghetto’ (Nero, 2005, pp. 231-232). In focusing on the squatted BGC, I look beyond commercial ‘gayborhoods’ to a community that was domestic as well as the site of attempts to collectively enact revolutionary politics. I also explore territorial tensions and exclusions around racialisation as well as sexual and gender non-conformity *beyond homonormativity*. The men of the BGC explicitly rejected assimilation, working instead to build a direct challenge to capitalism as part of a sexual and social revolution. The exclusions,

negotiations and investments at stake in the territory of the BGC are thus of a different order to those of homonormativity as conceived by Duggan and as deployed by geographers of sexualities in the study of gaybourhoods. A key contribution this chapter makes is thus to consider territorial exclusions and the co-constitution of spatial and the political within a self-consciously radical gay community.

Geographies of sexualities often take as their starting point that ‘there is nothing innate or natural’ where spaces and sexualities are concerned, and demonstrate how sexualities are created in and through space (Browne & Brown, 2016, p. 1). Here, I draw attention to the fact that the ‘Brixton’, the ‘Gay’ and the ‘Community’ in ‘Brixton Gay Community’ were points of intense territorial contestations, arguing that these categories merit sustained interrogation. In what follows, I begin by outlining the context in which the Brixton Gay Community came to be formed. I then offer a brief history of the Community, before exploring, for the rest of this chapter, the concerns set out above. This chapter is then supplemented with a brief account of the life of Pearl Alcock, the woman who ran ‘Pearl’s shebeen’ (which, as noted above, was an illegal bar against which the boundaries of the BGC were negotiated by some of its inhabitants).

The London Gay Liberation Front and experiments in communal living

The London Gay Liberation Front (GLF) first met on the 13th of October 1970, at a meeting called by Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellors (Robinson, 2007; Walter, 2018 [1980]). While traveling the United States, Walter stayed with a number of US GLF groups. The experience, as he wrote later, not only ‘changed the way’ he thought about his own homosexuality, but also about ‘the question of gender in general’ (Walter, 2018 [1980], pp. 9-10). Influenced by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, French situationism, Spanish anarchism, the anti-Vietnam war movement, feminism and communism, the ‘GLF had almost as many confrontations with the gay community as it did with the wider world’, wrote GLF member Keith Birch (Birch, 1988, p. 57; Robinson, 2007). Pushing against what they saw as the limited agenda of groups such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, the GLF sought nothing less than a sexual and social revolution that would ‘abolish all forms of social oppression’ (Power, 1995, p. 36) – among them capitalism and ‘the gender system’ itself (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 28; Robinson, 2007).

By early 1971, the GLF had developed into a network of groups which organised local meetings. However, significant political splits began in the GLF as early as the summer of 1971

(Robinson, 2007). Crucially, there were long-running struggles over the position of women in the Front, as well as over the relationship between ‘the gay movement’ and ‘the women’s movement’ (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 34; Robinson, 2007). These conflicts, Walter was careful to note, were not simply ‘between women and men,’ but rather ‘between feminists and anti-feminists’ in the GLF (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 32). ‘[A]ngry and disillusioned’, many lesbians who had been involved in the GLF left and focused on organising within the women’s liberation movement instead (Wall, 2017, p. 83). In the midst of these conflicts, many in the GLF were actively ‘searching for something that was basically gender-free’ (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 20).

Partly in response to these splits, many of those involved in the London-wide Front began to focus on smaller and more localised groups, including the South London GLF (Cook, 2013; Walter, 2018 [1980]). By the summer of 1972, as on-going crises brought any sense of the London-wide GLF as a coherent entity to a close, ‘the local groups increasingly went their separate ways’ (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 35). Though short-lived, the GLF’s legacy was considerable, with its influences being felt in the campaigning around AIDS and Clause 28 in the 1980s and 1990s (Birch, 1988; Cook, 2013; Robinson, 2007).

Crucially, the GLF’s legacy included a number of gay men’s communes, some of them squatted (Cook, 2013; Robinson, 2007; Walter, 2018 [1980]). The GLF’s emphasis on ‘living liberation’ was, for many, expressed most strongly through experiments in communal living (Robinson, 2007, p. 76; Walter, 2018 [1980]). Indeed, before its dissolution, the GLF had had a dedicated ‘Commune Group’ (Robinson, 2007, p. 76). Communes, for many in the GLF, were not simply house-sharing arrangements among multiple people – they were the grounds for conscious attempts to reject notions of private property, monogamy and privacy, and to build territories as alternatives to the nuclear family and the nuclear home (Cook, 2013; Power, 1995). It was imperative, Walter argued, that ‘gay people should play a leading role in the construction of [such] gender-free zone[s]’ (Walter, 2018 [1980], pp. 27-28).

The Brixton Gay Community

‘[P]eople,’ recalled BGC squatter Will in 1996, ‘brought themselves [to the Brixton Gay Community] for different reasons’ (‘Will’, 1996, n.p.). ‘Some were desperately fleeing from oppressive situations in their lives’, reads an account on the blog *urban75* to which Townson contributed, while ‘[o]thers were glad to find the company of unashamedly out gay people rather than remain confused and isolated’ (urban75, 2012a, n.p.). ‘Thank goodness for the

[Brixton Gay Community],’ reflected a BGC member in Hassan’s film, ‘or else I would probably have been stuck in a pokey little bedsit in Wimbledon, living on my own as a miserable gay man forevermore’ (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). For many, however, the primary reason for their arrival in the BGC ‘was homelessness’ (‘Will’, 1996, n.p.). ‘We were all poor as church mice,’ explained BGC squatter Terry Stewart in Hassan’s film (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). ‘None of us had any money. Few of us had jobs, because at the time unemployment was quite high’ (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). Because of this, he explained, ‘[we] couldn’t afford to have housing at the time, and certainly we wouldn’t be known as openly gay people living in rented accommodation. Landlords wouldn’t have been too happy to have you as tenants’ (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). Squatting was thus ‘a means of being able to live during that economic downturn’, according to Stewart; crucially, squatting and living collectively ‘also meant we were able to develop our political ideas about who we were, and what we were hoping to achieve’ (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014, n.p.). According to Townson, ‘Some consciously saw this as an opportunity to attack “straight” society through adopting an alternative lifestyle that challenged the prevailing norms of the patriarchal nuclear family and private property’ (urban75, 2012a, n.p.). ‘We were trying to make ties between patriarchy, the nuclear family and fascism’, Tony, one of the men I interviewed, told me. ‘Somehow, we did it. I don’t know how, but we did!’.

Most of the men who settled in the community came from outside London – whether from other parts of England, from Ireland, from elsewhere in Europe or from Australia (Cook, 2013). They were drawn to Brixton in part because of the abundance of empty buildings there. ‘When I got here in ‘74’, Tony told me, ‘Brixton was absolutely a wreck. ... The houses were falling apart’. The abundance of empty houses meant that there was a politically vibrant squatting scene already in place (Figure 5-2) (Cook, 2013). The Black radical Sabarr bookshop was located at 121 Railton Road, and the Brixton Black Women’s Group met there as well as at 65 Railton Road (Quashie, et al., 1990; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c; Vasudevan, 2017; Wolfe, 2011). The Squatters’ Union was next to number 65 (Ford, 2015). There were two affiliated (and predominantly white) women’s squatted centres – one at number 80 Railton Road and one at number 207 (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Ford, 2015; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c; mudlark121, 2018; urban75, 2012a). The *Race Today* collective was based at numbers 165–7 (Vasudevan, 2017).³ Railton Road was also home to

³ As noted – also in a footnote – in Chapter 2, The *Race Today* collective (so named after the journal they produced) was central to many struggles for racial liberation in Britain (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Waters, 2019). Its members included



Figure 5-2: The politically vibrant squatting scene (and ‘Pearl’s shebeen’) in the Railton Road area, around the BGC.

the offices of the newspapers *People’s News Service* and *Brixton’s Own Boss*, as well as the food co-op Brixton Whole Foods – with all three being based in squats (Ford, 2015; Hurst, 2009). The British Black Panthers were based in a house just off Railton Road, at 38 Shakespeare Road (Colin, et al., 2009).

The majority of the men in the Brixton Gay Community had been politically active before they moved to Brixton (Cook, 2013). Many had been involved in the London GLF and had continued organising through the South London Gay Liberation Front once the London GLF had come to an end (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Cook, 2013).

Jean Ambrose, Barbara Beese, Farrukh Dhondy, Patricia Dick, Leila Hassan, Darcus Howe, Gus John, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Akua Rugg and Mala Sen (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017; Waters, 2019). From 1973 to 1988, the collective’s journal was home to the work of the leading Black British intellectuals and activists of the time (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019). C.L.R. James lived above their Brixton offices (at 165-7 Railton Road) in his later years, until his death in 1989 (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017).

Some were members of the British Communist Party (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Cook, 2013). Those who came from Australia had been part of the anti-Vietnam war movement (Cook, 2013). '[N]ot everyone,' however, 'was politicised' before moving to the community, according to one of the men who lived there ('Steven', 1997, p. 14). Some of the inhabitants had initially been drawn to the community due to its 'mystique' and by their ties to other men who lived there, rather than by political ideals (Cook, 2013). Nevertheless, whether politicised before or after their move to the community, the squatters living there actively engaged in explorations of 'what it is to be gay' and 'what a gay community could be' ('Joe', 1997, n.p.).

'Quite a wonderful place in the middle of a city'

In Raúl Zibechi and Ramor Ryan's formulation, territories are spaces 'in which to build a new social organization collectively, where new subjects take shape and materially and symbolically appropriate their space' (Zibechi, 2012, p. 19). In Railton Road, the BGC squatters embarked on such a process. 'Our guiding thoughts were, "We want to have a very public presence as gay people,"' Tony told me. 'You know? "We want a collective presence, in a community."' Working out of their squats, the inhabitants of the BGC organised campaigns and protests; several of them took part in pickets of Brixton police station over the police's harassment of Black people (Cook, 2013). One of the men stood in the 1974 local elections as a GLF candidate, pledging 'to fight for the right of all oppressed minority groups including black people, unmarried mothers and the single homeless' (Cook, 2013, pp. 94-95).⁴ The South London Gay Community Centre was also frequented by many who did not live in the BGC squats ('Alberto', 1997, p. 10; Cook, 2013). 'Discos' were held in the basement of the Centre on Saturday nights, and a group of sadomasochist gay men also gathered there on occasion (Cook, 2013; 'Steven', 1997). A gay men's wrestling group met in the Centre's basement, and 'to counter the "macho" posturing of the [wrestling] group, a sewing bee and knitting circle was formed' (urban75, 2012a, n.p.). A dance group rehearsed there, as did the Brixton Faeries, a theatre troupe which included several of the squatters (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Cook, 2013; urban75, 2012a).

⁴ By Townson's account, however, the squatters were 'against Parliamentary Democracy as a meaningless sham[, so] it was pointed out that we were just doing this for the free publicity' (urban75, 2012a, n.p.).



Figure 5-3: 'Brixton Fairyland', as shown in Taha Hassan's documentary *Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting* (2014).

As Charles remembered, the territory of the BGC consisted of ten 'houses ... back[ed] on to each other' ('Charles', 1984, p. 11). Each of the houses had a 'focal point' where its inhabitants received guests – 'a kitchen as it was in some houses, a living room ... in others, [or] somebody's room' ('Charles', 1984, p. 11). Some of the men settled in specific houses, while others lived between two or three houses ('Will', 1996). An internal wall separating two houses was knocked down to create an area for communal meals ('Will', 1996). The squatters also knocked down the walls separating the houses' gardens ('Will', 1996). The shared garden



Figure 5-4: Several combined stills from Ron Peck's *Strip Jack Naked* (1991), showing a scene filmed in one of the BGC's living rooms and featuring several of the BGC's inhabitants. This scene was filmed for Peck and Paul Hallam's *Nighthawks* (1978), Britain's first gay-focused film. It was ultimately cut from *Nighthawks*, in part because some involved in the film's editing considered the scene 'too *political*' and argued it gave 'the "wrong impression" of being gay' (*Strip Jack Naked*, 1991, n.p.).

became known as 'Brixton Fairyland' (Figure 5-3) ('Will', 1996). It was, as one of the squatters remembered, 'a unique place. Quite a wonderful place in the middle of a city' ('Will', 1996, n.p.). The shared garden between the houses, combined with the fact that the men left the squats' back doors unlocked, meant that the squatters were able to easily move between houses without going out onto Mayall or Railton Roads. This, as Cook notes, fostered a sense of community as well as a certain insularity (Cook, 2013).

The squatters situated themselves and the Brixton Gay Community in opposition to what they saw as the apolitical and alienating commercial gay scene in London's Soho and Earl's Court areas, which they described as the 'straight gay scene' ('Steven', 1997, p. 12; Cook, 2013; Walter, 2018 [1980]). GLF politics were crucial to this stance. Involvement in the South London GLF was, according to BGC squatter Charles, the Community's primary 'group dynamic' ('Charles', 1984, p. 11). Indeed, as Thornycroft recalled in Hassan's documentary, 'the Gay Centre grew out of [the] South London GLF', and the decision to squat 78 Railton Road to open the Centre had been made in a South London GLF meeting (*Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting*, 2014, n.p.).

By many accounts, the 'serious Gay Liberation Front politics' and communal living arrangements of the BGC's inhabitants were successful in establishing the BGC as a politically radical alternative to the 'straight gay scene' (*Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting*, 2014, n.p.). As film director Ron Peck narrates in *Strip Jack Naked*, he and Paul Hallam filmed some scenes in the BGC (featuring several of its inhabitants) for their 1978 feature film *Nighthawks* (*Strip Jack Naked*, 1991; *Nighthawks*, 1978). As Britain's first explicitly gay-focused film, *Nighthawks* faced significant concerns about representation (Witt, 2006; *Strip Jack Naked*, 1991). 'When we were editing [*Nighthawks*],' recalls Peck, 'there was a lot of argument about ... whether [the BGC-set scenes] should stay in the film or not. Some people felt it gave the "wrong impression" of being gay' (*Strip Jack Naked*, 1991, n.p.). The scenes, Peck argues, were considered 'too alternative' and 'too political' by some (*Strip Jack Naked*, 1991, n.p.). According to him, '[t]he whole set-up' – gay men living communally in squats –

was deemed ‘altogether too weird’ by some critics (Strip Jack Naked, 1991, n.p.). The scenes were ultimately cut from *Nighthawks*, although much of the footage was incorporated into *Strip Jack Naked* (Figure 5-4). Those who argued for the inclusion of the scenes, in Peck’s telling, insisted that they posed important questions: ‘Why live alone or like a married couple? Why not share your life a little more generously, feel the support of being with your own people?’ (Strip Jack Naked, 1991, n.p.). Both the threat and the promise of the BGC-set scenes stemmed from the explicitly political *coming together* of gay men as a *community*. The grounds on which this community came together are thus worthy of interrogation.

Bordering the Brixton Gay Community

‘... girlfriends appearing’

Within the BGC, explained squatter Tim, ‘[t]here was generally a sort of very convivial atmosphere with people’ (‘Tim’, 1983, p. 4). Over time, however, conflicts developed. A community focusing on personal growth and self-awareness formed around 159 Railton Road, which led to tensions between ‘the brown rice people’ and the communist ‘hardliners’ who dismissively referred to 159 Railton Road as ‘purity ashram’ (‘Brian’, n.d. a, n.p.; ‘Will’, 1996, n.p.). These tensions, however, paled in comparison to what was to come. According to Tim, ‘[t]here were arguments but they didn’t seem to be the kind of devastating things that ... came later’ (‘Tim’, 1983, p. 4).

Some of the ‘devastating’ arguments alluded to by Tim occurred when some of the men who lived in the Brixton Gay Community or frequented the South London Gay Community Centre began sexual relationships with women. Some of these men identified as gay, seeing the term as denoting a *political* commitment to sexual and social revolution that did not *necessarily* entail having sex exclusively with men. Others identified as bisexual, arguing that, if abolishing ‘the gender system’ was the goal, ‘bisexuality [was] the answer rather than homosexuality’ (‘Charles’, 1984, p. 16). This led to bitter territorial arguments about the very meanings and politics of the terms ‘gay’ and ‘bisexual’, and about who the BGC and the South London Gay Community Centre were for. The fact that some of the men had ‘girlfriends appearing’, according to squatter Alex, ‘was sort of challenging the idea of true blue. Gay [sic] through and through’ (‘Alex’, 1997, p. 7).⁵

⁵ I surmise that Alex meant ‘the idea of “true-blue gay, through and through”’. Here, I’m reproducing the spelling as it appears in the archived interview transcript, as I’m quoting from it directly.

One such conflict took place, according to squatter Henry, when ‘an Australian ... former lover of mine ... arrived on the doorstep unannounced one day’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). ‘This’, Henry recalled, ‘was not an entirely pleasant surprise for me but ... I invited her to stay’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). At the time, Henry lived in the BGC at 145 Railton Road (‘Henry’, 1997). He shared that squat with, among others, Darren and Martin, who were in a relationship (‘Henry’, 1997; ‘Darren’, 2008). ‘[T]he dynamic of our household ... worked well enough until [her] arrival’, Henry recalled (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). Soon after her arrival, she and Martin had sex. This, according to Henry, ‘was a bombshell that just exploded in the house’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). The woman returned to Australia soon after, but the men in the house ‘were left in disarray’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). The situation, according to Henry, ‘created tensions which affected our day to day life with each other’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). These tensions, Darren was careful to note, were due to the fact that Martin had had sex *with a woman*, rather than anything to do with what this meant for his relationship with Darren (according to Darren, while the other men in the house ‘were outraged’, he ‘was not that bothered’) (‘Darren’, 2008, p. 4). The other men, according to Darren, ‘did not want [Martin] in the house’ any longer because ‘it was squatted [as] part of the gay community[,] it was a gay house!’ (‘Darren’, 2008, p. 4). Eventually, the men in the house met to discuss the situation. ‘At this meeting’, Henry recalled, ‘I surprised myself by suggesting that Martin move out’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 4). In the eyes of many, the fact that Martin had had sex with a woman marked him as no longer belonging in the territory of the Brixton Gay Community, unlike men – such as Henry – who may have had sexual relationships with women in the past but no longer did so. In the wake of these discussions, Darren decided that he would move out with Martin. ‘[I]t was a bit of a shock not about Martin but their attitude’, Darren remembered (‘Darren’, 2008, p. 5).

The South London Gay Community Centre, as part of the BGC, also became a contested space on these political, definitional and territorial grounds. As noted above, the Centre was frequented by a number of people who did not live in the BGC squats. Many of them identified as bisexual, and as squatter Steven remembered it, ‘There were people that felt ... that [bisexuals] shouldn’t really be allowed in the Centre’ (‘Steven’, 1997, p. 16). According to squatter Patrick, people ‘just became more and more split’ over the issue (‘Patrick’, n.d., n.p.). ‘[I]t was everybody against this group of people who identified as bisexual’, Patrick recalled, and many in the Brixton Gay Community began to refer to that group as ‘the nerds’

(‘Patrick’, n.d., n.p.).⁶ Things came to a head soon after the Centre was evicted by Lambeth Council on Wednesday the 21st of April 1976 (urban75, 2012a). Although the Centre was re-squatted the very next day, this was soon followed by an ‘announcement that there had been a “coup” at the Centre an [sic] that it had been taken over’ by some of the bisexuals (‘Alex’, 1997, p. 14). According to Thornycroft, the Centre closed for good within months, ‘after the principal people involved gave up the struggle with those we rudely called “The Nerds” who took over but were so un-together that they failed to pay the electricity and phone bills’ (urban75, 2012a, n.p.).

Clare Hemmings argues that while some demonize bisexuality ‘for supporting or even generating fixed oppositional structures of sexuality and gender’ (Hemmings, 2002, p. 1), others theorise bisexuality as an escape ‘from rigid sexed, gendered, and sexual oppositions’ (Hemmings, 2002, pp. 2-3). Others, still, see bisexuality as ‘always the middle ground between sexes, genders and sexualities, rather than being a sexuality, or indeed a gender or sex, in itself’ (Hemmings, 2002, p. 2). ‘Bisexual’ is thus a contested term. Crucially, as Hemmings notes, there have long been ‘claims that [bisexuals] do not exist as sexual subjects, or are confused, inauthentic, or damaged versions of other sexual identities’ (Hemmings, 2002, p. 4). Many such dynamics were in evidence in the territorial conflicts that took place in and over the boundaries of the Brixton Gay Community.

While some of the bisexuals in the South London Gay Community Centre argued that bisexuality was ‘the answer’, some of the gay men in the BGC – whether arguing that bisexuality upheld the patriarchy or refusing to recognise bisexuality altogether – positioned the bisexuals in the Centre and the self-identified gay squatters who had sexual relationships with women as being, in fact, heterosexual: in BGC member Brian’s phrasing, the ‘violent disputes ... that exploded’ (‘Brian’, 1983, p. 8) did so over ‘the questions of *hets* and *het* relationships in the houses’ (‘Brian’, n.d. a, n.p., emphases added). By Tim’s recollection, ‘There was a generalised panic [in the Centre] with T shirts [sic] proclaiming “Castrate Heteros” and things’ (‘Tim’, 1983, p. 9).

As Michael, one of the men I interviewed, explained it, these kinds of reactions were due to fact that many in Community felt ‘gay’ was an ‘embattled identity’ and they saw ‘any kind of erosion of that, of the specialness or the particularity of that experience [as] a threat’. Although, as he explained it, he did not share this sense of bisexuality as a ‘threat’ to

⁶ All of the BGC men interviewed – by me as well as by Cook, Hall, Townson and Thornycroft – appear to have forgotten the source of or meaning behind this nickname. For our purposes, what is important is that, through it, the bisexuals were designated as a specific faction.

‘specialness’, he nonetheless expressed some exasperation at the situation. ‘In terms of our particular battles’, he told me, laughing, ‘people *have* to identify. They *have* to choose a side’. Bisexuality, in this formulation, does not appear to be recognised as an identification or ‘a side’. ‘The argument went, “Well, if you’re bisexual, then surely you should identify with being gay, because it’s your homosexuality that’s being oppressed, not your heterosexuality”’, Harry, one of the men I interviewed, explained. ‘So ... you should really, from a political position, say “I’m gay”.’ Others, he explained, believed that ‘bisexuals don’t exist because they were in denial of being gay’. ‘I never actually went along with it,’ he told me with some regret, ‘but, I mean, I didn’t challenge that argument’.

[T]here were women here as well as men’

Another conflict which took place points not only to territorial contestations around bisexuality and the capaciousness of the term ‘gay’, but also around women living in the Brixton Gay Community. Most narratives of the BGC omit the fact that several women lived for long periods of time in the BGC squats; some, while making note of this, do so only in passing and do not seem to consider these women as having been part of the BGC. A rare counter-narrative emerged in a 1984 interview with BGC squatter James, however (‘James’, 1984). While living in the Community, James ‘started a relationship with a woman’ who, he noted, ‘was also a member of the gay community’ (‘James’, 1984, p. 10). Further, James emphasised that there had been other women members of the BGC, too, noting that ‘there were *women* here as well as men’ (James, 1984, p.5, emphasis added). According to Cook, one woman lived for a time at 146 Mayall Road,⁷ and two women lived at 159 Railton Road (Cook, 2013). Still, in most narratives of the Brixton Gay Community, it appears ‘conspicuously male’ (Cook, 2013, p. 96).

Recently, in a piece for the *Brixton Review of Books*, Kate Webb recounted that she and another woman, whom she names as ‘Collette’, swapped homes with some men in the BGC in 1980 (Webb, 2019). While the BGC men moved into Webb and Collette’s ‘hard-to-let’ council flat in Streatham, she and Collette moved into the men’s BGC squat at 143 Railton Road (Webb, 2019). ‘[I do not] remember,’ Webb wrote in her account, ‘what the other gay men felt

⁷ Cook in fact states that she lived at 46 Mayall Road, but this appears to be a typo. While 146 Mayall Road has been identified by others as being part of the BGC, this is the only mention of 46 Mayall Road being part of the BGC. In addition, 46 Mayall Road is a considerable distance away from all of the other houses comprising the BGC.

about the invasion of straight women onto their turf’ (Webb, 2019, p. 8).⁸ She and Collette were soon joined at 143 Railton Road by a nine-year-old girl who lived with them for a time (Webb, 2019). ‘Up to that point,’ according to Webb, ‘there had been a division: The Railton Road squats were inhabited by gay men, while women, many of whom were lesbians, squatted houses further north on Villa Road’ (Webb, 2019, p. 8). It appears that some in the BGC were uncomfortable with the erosion of this territorial boundary. According to Brian, the fact that two women lived at 159 Railton Road ‘set 159 apart because a lot of men in the other houses didn’t feel easy about women living there’ (‘Brian’, n.d. b, n.p.).⁹ Webb’s account portrays a rich, expansive and assertive life in Railton Road:

[E]ven in winter we were convivial, sitting out on the front steps at all hours of the day and night, drinking coffee, sometimes sharing a line of coke, listening to Steel Pulse, chatting to neighbours, arguing about politics, and waiting for Linton Kwesi Johnson’s daily pilgrimage up Railton Road ... to the *Race Today* offices ...

(Webb, 2019, p. 8).

Perhaps tellingly, however, no women were included in the two rounds of oral history interviews conducted by members of the BGC.¹⁰

According to James, his embarking in relationship with a woman who lived in the BGC ‘really shook a lot of people’, as ‘[a]ll of a sudden people discovered that they didn’t quite beleive [sic] in what they’d been preaching’ (‘James’, 1984, p. 10). The damage of these territorial conflicts was long-lasting: while being interviewed in 1984, James noted that, although some ‘people have certainly thought about that [situation] over the intervening years [and] have now started speaking to me about it’, others, however, ‘will still not speak [to me]. They still think it is the most unspeakable thing ever’ (‘James’, 1984, p. 11).

⁸ It appears that Webb describes Collette and herself as ‘straight’ with some sense of irony, or at least fluidity; as she goes on to write, not long after moving into 143 Railton Road she and Collette ‘became lovers’ (Webb, 2019).

⁹ Harry was much more forthright on this topic: ‘They didn’t want women in the community,’ he told me – especially, it seems, women who had sex with women. ‘They didn’t want anyone that – if you didn’t go to bed with men, you were fucking shit,’ Harry explained.

¹⁰ It should be noted that I have not interviewed any women who lived there, either. In my case, this is due to the fact that I have not been able to track any of them down in time to interview them for this thesis. As I write this (in late 2019), Webb’s *Brixton Review of Books* piece has only very recently been published. I very much hope to be able to interview her in the future.

'Pearl's place ... A gay place?'

As noted above, several of the BGC's inhabitants took part in pickets of Brixton police station over the police's harassment of Black people; more broadly, the BGC's inhabitants championed explicitly anti-racist and anti-fascist politics, seeing struggles for gay and Black liberation as intertwined (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Cook, 2013). 'Politically', according to BGC squatter Markus, '[we] also worked with ... Black groups' in Brixton; there was, as he remembered, 'very much a close link' with radical Black groups in the area ('Markus', 2008).¹¹ In spite of such alliances and sense of shared struggle, however, a number of dynamics emerge in accounts by the BGC's inhabitants that point to understandings of what being gay meant – and thus implicitly delineate the territory of the BGC – in ways that were often racialised and centred on whiteness.

As Cook has noted, there was a queer scene in Brixton that was predominantly Black (with 'queer' used in this instance as a deliberately open-ended and undefined umbrella term, as we do not know how people in that scene identified) (Cook, 2013). According to Ben, '[the] Hamilton [Arms at 128 Railton Road] and, um, The Atlantic [at 389 Coldharbour Lane] were major places where gay black people used to go to' ('Ben', 2008, p. 18; Urban, 2013b; Urban, 2014a). This scene also included a public sex culture revolving around the back of Brixton station and the (since closed) public toilets in what is now Windrush Square (Cook, 2013). Central to this predominantly Black queer culture was a shebeen (illegal bar) run by Jamaican-born Pearl Alcock. Located in the basement of 103 Railton Road, 'Pearl's shebeen' was about 351 ft (or 106.6m) away from the nearest BGC house, and many of the BGC men frequented it (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Cook, 2014; Spruce, 2016; Warner, 2019a; Warner, 2019b; Warner, 2019c).

Although some of the BGC's inhabitants explicitly recognised Pearl's shebeen as 'a Black gay shebeen' (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014), others appeared not to recognise it as such, or to be ambivalent on the matter. As Nina Held has observed in her work on the racialisation of Manchester's Gay Village, 'bodies racialized as "other"' are often read by white queers 'as "straight"' (Held, 2017, p. 344; Held, 2015); thus, she has noted 'it was quite common during [her] research that black (and Asian) women and men were not perceived to be gay', even when *in* Manchester's Gay Village (Held, 2015, pp. 39-40). Spaces

¹¹ As Ben recalled, *Race Today's* Linton Kwesi Johnson specifically 'was very supportive of our community' ('Ben', 2008). When, in its early days, the BGC 'were threatened,' according to Ben, '[he and] Olive Morris did an awful lot to decrease the tensions' ('Ben', 2008). 'She was great,' as Ben recalled, adding that Johnson 'was indispensable' ('Ben', 2008).

centred around non-white queers (such as particular club nights catering specifically to Black and/or Asian queers) were consequently, she noted, also assumed by white queers to be ‘mainly straight’ (Held, 2015, p. 39). Similar dynamics appear to have played out between some of the men who lived in the BGC and the predominantly Black clientele at Pearl’s shebeen. While men there would dance together in what has been described by an attendee as a ‘bump-and-grind fashion which was the very epitome of licentious’ (Warner, 2019c, n.p.), for some in the BGC the status of Pearl’s shebeen as a ‘gay space’ was uncertain. Among the material on the BGC donated to the LSE’s Hall-Carpenter archive, for example, a hand-written question stands out in a page of notes: ‘Pearl’s place ... A gay place?’ This uncertainty appears to have stemmed not because ‘straight people were [also] welcome’ (even if the shebeen was not geared towards them), but because of implicit divisions made by some of the BGC men between ‘blacks and gays’ that seem to foreclose the possibility of an overlap between these presumably distinct categories (‘Alex’, 1997, p. 17). In Alex’s formulation, for example, political alliances ‘between blacks and gays [were] too much for black people’ because ‘[t]hey seemed to be claiming’ that these would ‘weake[n] their blackness’ (‘Alex’, 1997, p. 17). Still, he argued, such alliances were made when the *gay* men of the BGC ‘went down [to Pearl’s] and made contact [with t]he *black* guys’ (‘Alex’, 1997, pp. 18, emphases mine). ‘[A] lot of black guys ... used to go there’, recalled Steven in an interview, although some ambiguity appears to have lingered for him around their presence in a bar which others in the BGC recognised as frequented overwhelmingly by Black queer men (‘Steven’, 1997, p. 18). ‘Presumably’, he mused, ‘they were closeted’ (‘Steven’, 1997, p. 18). The possible queerness of the Black people in that space – which might have been experienced and negotiated in entirely different terms than those prevalent in the BGC – appears to be foreclosed in these accounts.

In line with dynamics long observed on the part of white queers towards queers of colour (Schweighofer, 2018), for Henry, going to Pearl’s shebeen appears to have simultaneously entailed the racialised and sexualised exoticisation and rejection of Black men. ‘There I was’, he recalled in 1997, ‘a terrified little white boy being sensually samba-ed around by a gorgeous black man’ (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 3). Ultimately, his ‘one and only visit to Pearl’s’ seems to have been an experience not only of attraction and fear, but also of alienation (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 3). ‘I guess in many ways my visit to Pearl’s symbolises my relationship to the black community in Brixton’, he wrote (‘Henry’, 1997, p. 3). ‘I never connected in any personal sense. My contact was limited to commercial transactions (shopping, buying Tube or bus tickets) or the occasional Rasta stopping me to ask “D’ya wanna score, mon?”’ (‘Henry’, 1997). ‘[I]t seems to me’, he added, ‘that I was not alone in this alienation, this division’



Figure 5-5: Still from Ron Peck's *Strip Jack Naked* (1991), showing a scene filmed in one of the BGC's bedrooms and featuring BGC inhabitant Colm Clifford (on the right, in the blue shirt). Note the sequined red dress hanging on the wall. This scene was filmed for Peck and Paul Hallam's *Nighthawks* (1978), but was ultimately cut from the film (*Strip Jack Naked*, 1991).

(‘Henry’, 1997). For others in the BGC, such a division appears to have been marked primarily by fear. ‘Say I met a Black guy ... in the local cottage’, Harry told me, ‘and the Black guy came home with me’ – this, he argued, would lead to reactions on the part of some BGC inhabitants along the lines of “‘Oh my god. We’re going to be robbed!’ That kind of shit. They didn’t say it, but it was, you know, “‘You’re taking a risk, aren’t ya?’” For some of the BGC’s inhabitants, most prominent in such encounters appears to have been racialised fear, rather than any sense of shared gayness. ‘I don’t think there was any intention of it being an all-white sort of commune’, one of the men I interviewed told me, ‘but it was self-selective in terms of people who got to live there’.

In recent years, scholars working in a variety of disciplines have offered nuanced accounts demonstrating that, in many cases, 1970s political organising was much more ‘questioning, queer [and] coalitional’ than it is commonly thought (Enke, 2018, pp. 10-11). Thus, although it might be tempting to consider the territorial conflicts over the BGC as simply a sign of the times, to ascribe them to dated conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, and to attribute them to an all-too-familiar brand of 1970s separatism, it is worth remembering that

the BGC was formed in the context of the London GLF and its aftermath, and that, initially, men and women worked together in the London GLF. It must be mentioned that when the South London Gay Community Centre was evicted, many of its activities carried on in the women's centre next door, at 80 Railton Road ('Patrick', 1996; Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; urban75, 2012a). Further, as noted above, many in the GLF were 'searching for something that was basically gender-free', and 'gender bending was encouraged' in the BGC itself (urban75, 2012a, n.p.). Scenes filmed in the BGC for *Nighthawks* appear to give glimpses of these attitudes: One scene features what is presented as a very casual gathering of BGC inhabitants, and one of them is in drag – a fact which is not remarked upon (Figure 5-4); another scene, set in the bedroom of the character played by BGC inhabitant Colm Clifford, features a red sequined dress (presumably belonging to Clifford's character) hanging on the wall – this, too is not remarked upon (Figure 5-5). It must be emphasised that during this period, 'gay', for many, was a capacious term which encompassed profound interrogations of gender; according to Walter, 'the radical drag people' in the GLF (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 23) and '[f]em gay men' who 'identif[ied] with the women's liberation movement and its struggles' were essential to the Gay Liberation Front project (Walter, 2018 [1980], p. 33). Retrospectively-stabilised terms such as 'lesbian' were, for many, similarly open-ended: Self-identified 'transvestites', 'transsexuals' and 'drag queens' actively explored 'the whole question of [gender] roles' in the pages of the 'Lesbians Come Together' special issue of *Come Together*, the GLF's newsletter (Transvestite, Transsexual and Drag Queen Group, 2018 [1972]).¹² This is not to suggest that such interrogations were conflict-free;¹³ it is to suggest, however, that the bitterly contested boundaries established around the territory of the Brixton Gay Community along particular lines of gender and sexuality were far from self-evident or inevitable. Further, the BGC's politics and organising – which explicitly conceptualised struggles for gay and Black liberation as intertwined – as well as the BGC's proximity and occasional overlap with a thriving, predominantly Black queer scene in Brixton also trouble any easy assumptions as to why it assumed the forms it did. Indeed, the very fact that these boundaries were actively contested by the bisexuals in the South London Gay Community Centre, the gay men who had sex with women in the BGC squats and those who participated in Brixton's broader queer scenes is evidence of this.

¹² Such classificatory and terminological interrogations and uncertainty is nothing new. '[S]ince the late nineteenth century', Annamarie Jagose has noted, 'knowledge of homosexuality has always been structured by strenuously contested categories' (Jagose, 1996, p. 6).

¹³ GLF member Stuart Feather's (2015) observations – ranging from the tentatively supportive to the bewildered and dismissive to the outright transphobic – give more insight into the broad range of terms, sexualities, genders and identities operative in the London GLF milieu, as well as some of the intense contestations around these.

Conclusion

As noted in Chapter 4, on the 25th of October 1977 the GLC announced an amnesty and offered to legitimise the occupancy of every squatter in GLC premises. Many of the BGC squatters had, by this time, become tired of living in poor conditions (Cook, 2013). Further, the conflicts outlined above had left many disillusioned, and their sense of community fractured. Along with many of London's squatters, some of the BGC squatters accepted the GLC's offers of permanent tenancies in 'hard-to-let' properties, and so moved out of the BGC. The GLC's amnesty, as noted earlier, also led to the formation of several housing co-operatives; the BGC squats which remained inhabited gradually became, between 1982 and 1984, part of the Brixton Housing Co-op (Cook, 2013). The co-op embarked on a refurbishment programme in consultation with the BGC squatters, as part of which the houses were subdivided into single occupancy units; the communal garden, however, was retained (Cook, 2013).

Revisiting and expanding on Matt Cook's work, this chapter contributes to understandings of squatting in England by dwelling on the dynamics and negotiations constitutive of an explicitly political experiment in squatting and communal living, and by centering the ways in which gender, race and sexuality operated in a squatted community – processes which the literature on squatting in England has long alluded to but seldom explored. Further, where geographies of urban sexualities remain focused on 'gaybourhoods' and on the 'homonormative' exclusions and inequities on which they are often built, this chapter considers territorial exclusions beyond commercial 'gayborhoods' and homonormativity, focusing instead on a self-consciously radical gay space.

According to Townson, the South London Gay Community Centre had been opened because 'it became clear ... that there was a need for gay people to have their own self-contained, self-defined space in which to socialise and grow both personally and politically.' As this chapter has demonstrated, the boundaries established around the territory of the BGC along particular lines of race, gender and sexuality were far from self-evident or uncontested. Communities and their spaces are not pre-political, spontaneous, organic or natural; rather, as this chapter's epigraph suggest, to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of power. As illustrated here, collectivities, communal subjectivities and political projects are constantly (re)constituted through a range of spatialised practices, processes and contestations. The task, then, is '[r]epeatedly to ask how ... categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating' (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 27).

Pursuing a guiding aim of this thesis, this chapter has insisted on the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. It has spatialised the terms, identifications, politics and exclusions through which the BGC was assembled, built and demarcated. It has argued that squatting and the particular geographies of Brixton provided the BGC's inhabitants with specific opportunities to both come together *as* and actively explore *what* a gay community *could be*. Squatting neighbouring houses meant that they were able to actively adapt their built environment and create communal spaces by, for example, knocking down walls and fences between houses and gardens; this meant that the BGC squatters were able to move between houses without having to leave the material territory they'd created, which strengthened both a sense of community as well as a demarcation from, uneasy proximity to and occasional overlap with a predominantly Black queer scene in Brixton. The racialised fear, alienation, desire, unknowing and misrecognition expressed by inhabitants of the BGC with regard to Pearl's clientele and Black men who ventured into the BGC; the concentration of those with 'hippie' politics in a particular house, apart from the 'communist hardliners'; the 'coup' staged by the bisexual 'Nerds' at the South London Gay Community Centre; the tensions around women living in the BGC and the relationships that the men of the BGC had with them – all of these were intensely political conflicts which cannot be abstracted from their spatial and territorial dimensions, and representative of the complex dynamics we must ground deployments of squatting in.

During the same periods in which the BGC was going through all of the processes and dynamics explored above, and in the same road, another group deployed squatting in markedly different ways. The Brixton Black Women's Group and its members squatted as a way to assert a right to space and presence in England amidst the ongoing violences of colonialism. For them, squatting was one survival tactic among many in the struggle against the policing, criminalisation, dispersal and containment of Black people in the streets, in schools, at the border and in their homes. It is to them that the following chapter turns.



ASIDE: *Pearl Alcock*

Born in Jamaica on the 16th of April 1934, Pearlina Smith was raised in Kingston's Gold Street (General Register Office, 2019; Kurlansky, 1992). It is unclear when she started going by 'Pearl'. At the age of 25, she left her French-Canadian husband (from whom she might have acquired the surname 'Alcock') and boarded a ship to England (Tate Britain, 2005a; Kurlansky, 1992). Settling in Leeds, she worked as a maid and then in factories (Tate Britain, 2005a; Kurlansky, 1992). On saving £1,000, Alcock moved to Brixton, into 103 Railton Road – a building with commercial premises on the ground floor, two flats in the upper floors and a basement (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Kurlansky, 1992; Warner, 2019a). She opened a women's clothing store in the ground floor and moved into one of the flats above, likely in 1970 (the year she was first recorded at that address in the local electoral register) (Kurlansky, 1992; Lambeth Electoral Registers, 1965-1995).

To make ends meet, Alcock ran a 'shebeen' (illegal bar or club) in the basement below her shop (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Kurlansky, 1992). Known as 'Pearl's shebeen', it ran underneath two rooms and had a bar at the far end (Warner, 2019c). According to a Brixton Gay Community inhabitant I interviewed, '20-odd people' could fit in the club at one time; he also noted that there had been a bakery at 103 Railton Road at some point, as there was still a baker's oven in the basement. Although the shebeen's clientele were in the majority Black queer men, 'straight people were welcome', according to Alcock's long-time friend Dirg Aaab-Richards (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.; Spruce, 2016; Warner, 2019c). Alcock herself identified as bisexual (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Cook, 2014). 'The dancing was something else,' remembered David Warner, a friend of Alcock and occasional shebeen patron (Warner, 2019c, n.p.). '[M]en were grabbing each other and dancing in a smooch or bump-and-grind fashion which was the very epitome of licentious' (Warner, 2019c, n.p.).

Although Alcock told Aaab-Richards that her shebeen's patrons included police officers, this did not make her shebeen immune to a police crackdown in the summer of 1979 (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Warner, 2019b; Warner, 2019c). As recounted by Warner, Alcock told him that police in the area 'called all the shebeen owners and operators to a meeting in Brixton Police Station' (Warner, 2019b, n.p.). There, they were told 'to stop selling alcohol, or get a license' to do so, and that anyone caught selling alcohol without a license would be prosecuted (Warner, 2019b, n.p.). Alcock, according to Warner, was unable to afford a license (Warner, 2019b). Fearing prosecution, she stopped selling alcohol; instead, she began charging an admission fee, and guests were free to bring their own drinks (Warner, 2019c). This 'new system', however 'killed off her trade' (Warner, 2019c, n.p.), and 'Pearl's was finished within a few weeks of the new policy coming in' (Warner, 2019b, n.p.).

In the aftermath of the Brixton uprising of 1981, Alcock's precarious financial situation worsened (Figure 5-6). 'After the '81 riot', she told writer Mark Kurlansky, 'there was no business. The

store went flat' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). Alcock closed her shop and opened a café in its place (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Kurlansky, 1992). According to Aaab-Richards, Alcock 'struggl[ed] in her condemned premises[,] making (delicious) patties for sale and homemade soups' (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.). Her café became 'a point of refuge' for many people in the area, and it was '[t]his patronage [which] allowed her to keep her head above water' (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.). Following the 1985 Brixton rebellion, however, '[e]verything got flat again' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). 'It was so bad', Alcock told Kurlansky, that she 'got three months behind electricity' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). When an electrician arrived to cut off her power, Alcock tried to hit him with a frying pan (Kurlansky, 1992). 'Then', she told Kurlansky, 'the police came and said, "You cannot lick him with a frying pan"' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). Alcock tried to keep the café running in the dark (Kurlansky, 1992).

In 1985, unable to afford a birthday card for a friend, Alcock drew one with Magic Markers on a women's tights packaging insert (Aaab-Richards, 2019; Kurlansky, 1992; Tate Britain, 2005a). This act of improvisation and creativity would change her life. The birthday card was so well received that Alcock, still using packaging inserts, began making bookmarks with coloured pencils and selling them for £1 each (Kurlansky, 1992; Aaab-Richards, 2019). 'It was like I gone mad', she told Kurlansky (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). 'Everything I get I was scribbling on. The receipts at the cafe. Everything. ... I wasn't interested in if you come to buy the tea. ... I couldn't stop working' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237). She began experimenting with pastels and acrylics, as well as with painting on a bigger scale (Aaab-Richards, 2019). Brixton's 198 Gallery started representing her in the late 1980s; her work was exhibited there a number of times, as well as in the Brixton Art Gallery, the Almeida Theatre and the Bloomsbury Theatre (198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, 2017; Aaab-Richards, 2019; Kinley, 2005; Warner, 2019c). This enabled Alcock to travel to Jamaica in the early 1990s to visit her father, whom she had not seen for thirty-two years; she later went back for his funeral (Kinley, 2005).

Alcock's overall financial situation, however, remained insecure. Sometime around 1990, she moved into a council flat at 12A St George's Residences, across the road from 103 Railton Road (Lambeth Electoral Registers, 1965-1995). Although 12A was 'cold and damp', Alcock created an 'environment with ... many lamps and glass cabinets full of porcelain figurines' where 'everything was in perfect order' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). During this period, Alcock's paintings caught the attention of art dealers and curators Monika Kinley and Victor Musgrave; they bought a number of them for their collection of 'outsider art' (Kinley, 2005; Dempsey, 2014). 'She paints both Jamaican landscapes and what she calls her "Mood Pictures", which are more abstract and atmospheric,' Kinley wrote in 2005, adding that Alcock was 'a big-hearted generous woman with principles that would be hard to live up to' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). The growing recognition of her talent does not seem to have eased Alcock's feelings about her life in England. 'I have suffered all these years', she told Kurlansky while living at 12A, adding, 'I shouldn't have come' (Kurlansky, 1992, p. 237).

Sometime between 1995 and 1996, Alcock moved into Flat B at 93 Effra Parade, which was part of the St George's Residences Housing Co-op (Aaab-Richards, 2019; General Register Office, 2019; Lambeth Electoral Registers, 1965-1995). Her new home was 'warm, cosy and welcoming' (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.; Kinley, 2005). According to Aaab-Richards, Alcock 'loved it – even if she sometimes found the stairs challenging later on' (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.). 'She does most of her work at night', Kinley wrote of this period in Alcock's life (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). '[S]he loves the silence, sitting in her leather chair, smoking her roll-ups with her art materials on a coffee table beside her' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). Although Alcock 'often talk[ed] about spending her last years in her homeland', according to Kinley, she later decided she was 'too old and frail' to make the move (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). '[S]he finds walking a great effort', wrote Kinley, 'and so goes out very little' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). Kinley gifted Alcock a canary; 'this bird,' Kinley wrote, 'became like her child' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). According to Kinley, Alcock 'would sing to him and he would answer' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104). When Kinley arranged an exhibition of Alcock's work in Nottingham, 'she could not be persuaded to leave him ... A whole day was too much' (Kinley, 2005, p. 104).

Alcock's work was exhibited closer to home from the 13th of September 2005 until the 2nd of January 2006, as part of Tate Britain's 'Outsider Art' exhibition (Tate Britain, 2005b). She died four months after the exhibition's close, on the 7th of May 2006 (General Register Office, 2019). She was 72. 'There was a lovely turn-out at her funeral,' recalled Aaab-Richards (Aaab-Richards, 2019, n.p.). In 2010, Kinley and Musgrave gifted their collection of 'outsider art' to Manchester's Whitworth Art Gallery, which hosted an exhibition of Alcock's work between the 18th of May 2019 and the 12th of January 2020 (Whitworth Art Gallery, 2019). The ground floor and basement of 103 Railton Road have been converted into flats (Figure 5-7).



Figure 5-6: View of 103 Railton Road (from Effra Parade) in the immediate aftermath of the April 1981 Brixton uprising (Lambeth Public Relations Photographs, 1981).

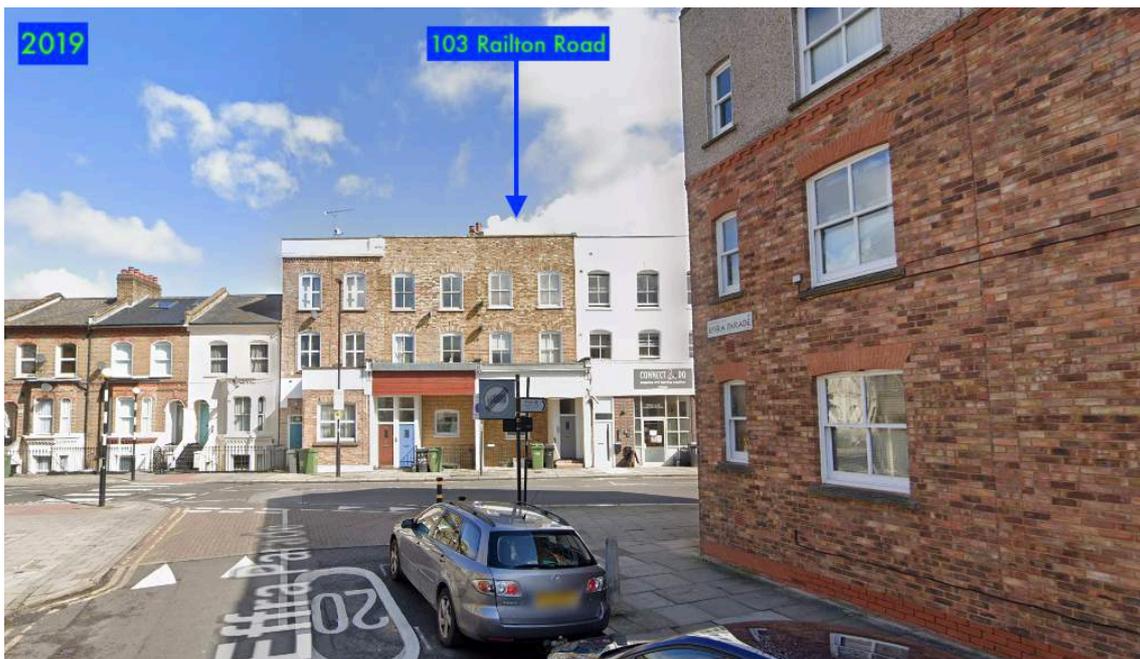


Figure 5-7: View of 103 Railton Road (from Effra Parade) in March 2019. The ground floor and the basement have been converted into flats (Google, 2019c).

Note: This section's header image was made by me using a portrait of Alcock from the Brixton Society website (The Brixton Society, 2017) and a detail from Alcock's 1987 painting Celebration of the Night (Kinley, 2005).

Chapter 6 / ‘There are empty houses; we have a right to them as Black folks’: Squatting and the geographies of the Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1970–1985

Introduction

When ... Black people began to enter Britain as immigrants, we came to a country we had already helped to build.

Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe (1985, p. 7)

This chapter builds a historical and political geography of the Brixton Black Women’s Group (BBWG), a socialist, anti-imperialist feminist organisation active in the 1970s and 1980s in south London (Scafe, 2002a). It does so by drawing on writing by and about the BBWG, on archival material about BBWG co-founder Olive Morris and on interviews I conducted with members of the BBWG. Gathering this material, this chapter documents the spaces of the BBWG, which accounts of the BBWG have largely neglected. It does so to spatialise the history and politics of the BBWG, arguing that the BBWG emerged in the context of geographical struggles around the ongoing violences of colonialism, and that the squatted and non-squatted spaces in which the group organised shaped the BBWG and its work in crucial ways. In doing so, this chapter expands the ways in which squatting in England has been understood. In attending to the BBWG, its spaces, its politics and its work, squatting can be reconsidered through histories, struggles dynamics and forms of resistance which the literature on squatting in England has overlooked, and which give squatting very different resonances to those explored in the literature thus far.

Situating the Brixton Black Women’s Group

The BBWG as a group, as well as many of its individual members, were prolific in their writing. The group produced their own newsletter, *Speak Out*. Collectively written pieces also appeared in publications such as *Race Today* (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1974), *Red Rag* (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1978), *Spare Rib* (OWAAD, 1979), *Feminist Review* (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984a) and the edited collection *Sweeping Statements: Writing from*

the Women's Liberation Movement 1981-83 (Kanter, et al., 1984). Writing by the BBWG as a group overwhelmingly focuses on the issues they organised around, on the coalitions they were part of and on establishing their politics; the group's history and spaces, however, receive scant attention in their work.

Writing by members of the group has appeared in *Feminist Review* (Bogle, 1988) and the edited collections *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Grewal, et al., 1988) and *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (James & Harris, 1993). This body of work also includes the trailblazing book *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Bryan, et al., 1985). Written by BBWG members Beverley Bryan and Suzanne Scafe with Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) co-founder Stella Dadzie, *The Heart of the Race* is the first sustained account of Black women's history in Britain written by Black women (Sisters in Study, 1988; Sudbury, 1998). With the exception of *The Heart of the Race* (which features a section on the BBWG), members of the group have only occasionally touched on the BBWG in their writing, focusing instead on the political context in which the group operated (Mama, 1995; Williams, 1993). Details of the spaces and history of the group thus remain elusive.

A number of interviews and oral histories with members of the BBWG have been vital in filling in some of the chronological and spatial gaps in writing by the BBWG and its members.¹ With the notable exception of interventions by BBWG member Gerlin Bean in a 2009 interview (Bean, 2009) and by BBWG member Gail Lewis in a 1990 discussion with fellow members (Quashie, et al., 1990) and in a 2011 oral history interview (Lewis, 2011), these have also largely not addressed the importance of squatting to the group. As outlined below, this may be because although squatting was essential in enabling the work of the group, it was a means to several ends rather than an objective in itself, and its squatted spaces were nodes in networks of decolonial resistance which included a range of non-squatted spaces.

This neglect of the history and spatialities of the group has been replicated in much of the academic engagements with the BBWG. The key contributions of the BBWG as a group and of some of its individual members are recognised in academic writing on the ways Black women have deployed 'soul' style as a tool of resistance; on accounts of the history of communist organising in Great Britain between 1945 and 2000; on considerations of the

¹ See, for example, the oral histories gathered by the Black Cultural Archives in 2009 and 2010 for their *The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement* collection, several of which were provided by members of the BBWG (Black Cultural Archives, 2009-2010). Several members of the BBWG were also interviewed by the Remembering Olive Collective (Colin, et al., 2009). Finally, BBWG members Gail Lewis and Judith Lockhart were interviewed as part of the British Library's *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project* (Lewis, 2011; Lockhart, 2009).

concept of ‘political Blackness’; on overviews of the dynamics between Black and white feminists in England between 1968 and 1993, and on tracings of Britain’s Black radical cultural-political formations (Delap, 2016; Ford, 2015; Laybourn, 2006; Swaby, 2014; Thomlinson, 2016; Waters, 2019). Although these provide rich and vital engagements with the broader context in which the BBWG organised, they have not, however, given *sustained* attention to the group itself. Julia Sudbury’s (1998) ground-breaking study of Black women’s organisations in Great Britain and Tracy Fisher’s (2012) seminal work on Black diaspora feminisms in Britain are key exceptions, in that they do substantially engage with the BBWG, its politics and its work; however, squatting and the group’s spaces more broadly are still not addressed in detail in these contributions.

Squatting *does* receive attention in academic and non-academic writing on BBWG co-founder Olive Morris. Thus, most of the information about squatting with regard to the group comes from accounts of Olive Morris’s life. Significantly, in these accounts Morris is consistently presented in individualized terms. She was, however, very much part of a collective and a community; further, as BBWG member Gerlin Bean put it, ‘[i]t was women squatting’ in this community, not only Morris (Bean, 2009, p. 3). Although the focus here is on the BBWG as a whole, Morris remains an important figure in this chapter. The wealth of archival material on her life and the vital role she played in the BBWG make Morris a valuable figure with which to track key moments and places in the history of the group. Here, her life provides ‘continuity and direction among a larger cast of characters ... places and networks’ (Hodder, 2017, p. 457).

In what follows, I give a brief overview of Olive Morris’ position in accounts of London’s squatting history, of her early life and of what led her to start squatting. With this context in place, I turn to the BBWG, tracing its beginnings and the spaces of its formation. I then unpack some of the ways in which members of the BBWG deployed squatting as a tactic in geographical struggles around the ongoing violences of colonialism, exploring how this tactic shaped their coming together and their work in key ways. Following a consideration of the group’s squatted spaces within a rich network of spaces and practices of decolonial resistance and community, I outline the conflicts that arose when the BBWG applied for local authority funding and obtained a short-life license for a building they had initially squatted – conflicts which significantly contributed to the group’s disbanding.

SQUATTERS' HANDBOOK

30p

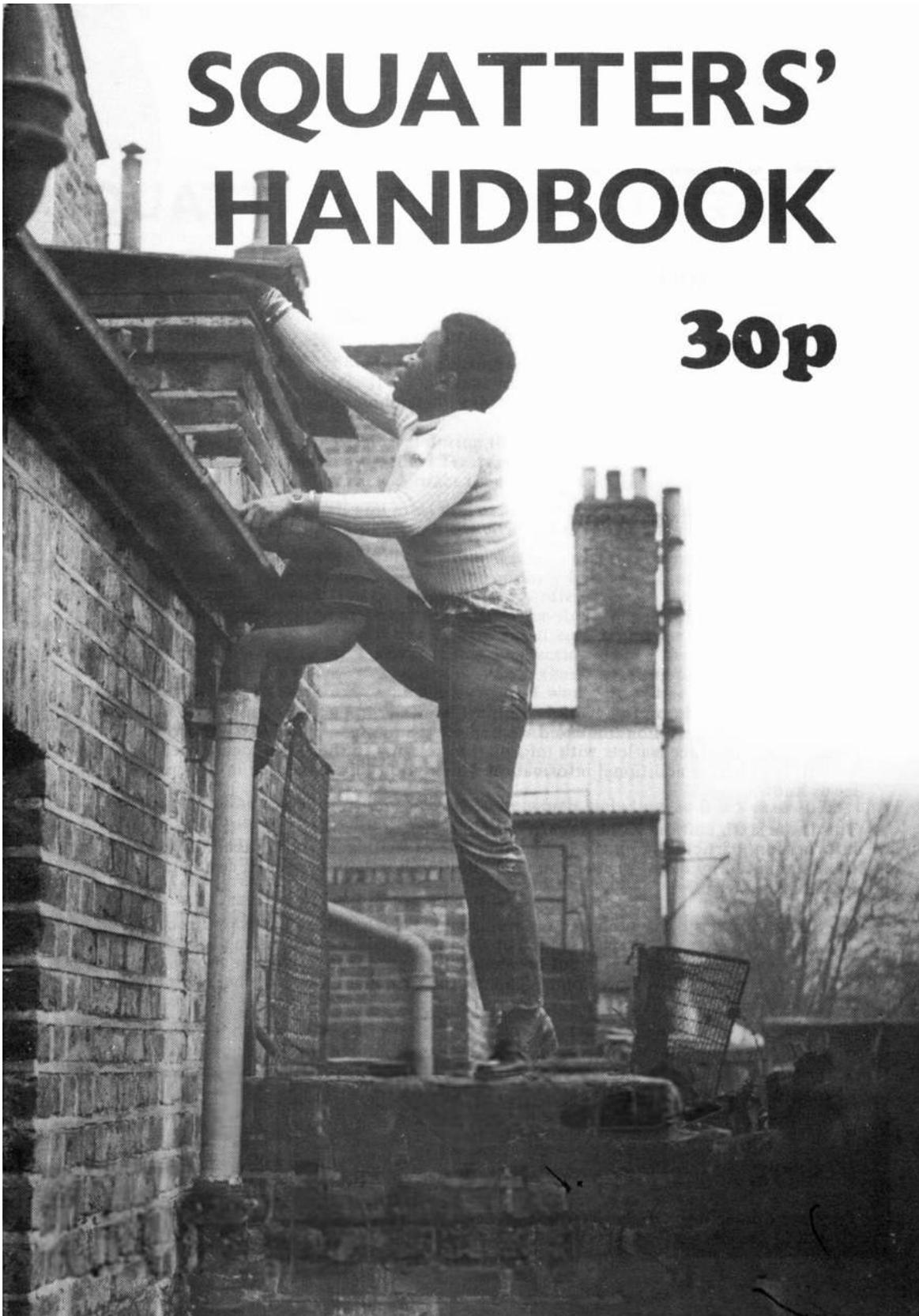


Figure 6-1: Cover of the 1979 edition of the Squatters' Handbook, showing Olive Morris scaling the back of 121 Railton Road during an eviction attempt (Advisory Service for Squatters, 1979).

Olive Morris

Olive Morris occupies a peculiar position in accounts of London's squatting history. In some ways, she is ubiquitous: she appears on the cover of the 1979 edition of the *Squatter's Handbook* (Figure 6-1), and she is frequently mentioned in passing in these accounts (Advisory Service for Squatters, 1979). Yet these short, frequent mentions give no real insight into her life, politics and work. Her almost decade-long involvement with the BBWG often goes unmentioned. For example, *Squatting: The Real Story* (which, as noted in Chapter 2, remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of squatting in Britain), devotes entire chapters to communities such as Villa Road and Elgin Avenue but only has this to say about Morris:

‘Olive Morris and Liz Turnbull [Obi] became the first successful squatters of private property in Lambeth when they occupied a flat above a launderette in Railton Road. Successfully fighting off attempts at illegal eviction, they set an example for hundreds of homeless young people in Brixton and the flat remained squatted for many years’ (Wates & Wolmar, 1980, p. 33).

The importance of this squat for Black radical organising in London – addressed below – is completely elided.

In the time since this thesis project began, there has been a surge of interest in Morris. In 2015, she became one of the figures featured in the Brixton Pound, a currency designed to support businesses in the area (Brixton Pound, n.d.). In 2016, a 1973 photograph of her taken by Neil Kenlock (Figure 6-2) was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery (Kenlock, 1973). In 2018, there was a brief mention of her in the British edition of the children's book *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* (Harrison, 2018). An obituary of Morris was published in 2019 in the *New York Times* as part of the paper's 'Overlooked' series (Tsang, 2019). On the 26th of June 2020 – marking what would have been her 68th birthday – Google featured Morris in one of its famous 'Google Doodles' (Cruickshank, 2020).² Although this recognition of Morris' work is very welcome and long overdue, such accounts follow a well-established pattern of focusing on individual Black women's lives rather than exploring their collective organising (Sudbury, 1998).

These recent invocations of Morris build on more substantial considerations of her life and work undertaken by her friends and fellow members of the BBWG and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD). *The Heart of the Race* features a section about Morris and is dedicated to Morris (as well as to Sylvia Ome Erike, a BBWG member

² This can be viewed at <https://www.google.com/doodles/olive-morris-68th-birthday>.



Figure 6-2: Olive Morris at 121 Railton Road, Brixton (Kenlock, 1973).

and co-founder of OWAAD who died in the early 1980s) (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Brixton Black Women's Group, 1983a; Dadzie & Cohen, 2011; Scafe, 2002b; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Almost thirty years after Morris' death, Liz Obi – who was mentioned along with Morris in the *Squatting: The Real Story* quote presented above – spearheaded the gathering of an archive on Morris by co-founding the Remembering Olive Collective (ROC) in 2008.³ The ROC has amassed a considerable amount of material on Morris' life, her politics, the projects she was involved in and the squats in which she lived. In the course of its work, the ROC interviewed several members of the BBWG, and although the focus was on Morris, much can be gleaned about the BBWG's history from these interviews. As BBWG member Jocelyn Wolfe put it, 'if Olive came to tea, she came to tea – but so did Claudette [Williams] and Gail [Lewis] and Judith [Lockhart] ... and Gerlin [Bean] and Monica [Dawkins] and Joan [Morris], do you know what I mean?' (Wolfe, 2009, pp. 36-37).

'She had to squat because they wouldn't give her anywhere to live'

Born in Harewood, in St. Catherine parish, Jamaica, on the 26th of June 1952, Olive Elaine Morris was nine when she and her three siblings – Jennifer, Ferryn, and Basil – joined their parents, Vincent Morris and Doris Morris (*née* Moseley), in London in 1962 (Allotey, 2012; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009b). Upon their arrival, they met two younger siblings born in England – Errol and Yana – and lived at 7 Milford Street, SW8. Their father worked as a forklift driver in Weybridge; their mother worked first as a cleaner and then at the Decca factory in Battersea (Ford, 2015; Lewis, 2009; Morris, 2009).

Morris left home aged between fourteen and fifteen and was temporarily in foster care (Lewis, 2009). In 1968, aged sixteen, she left school with no qualifications, going on to study 'O' and 'A' levels at evening classes while working a full-time job (Allotey, 2012; Bryan, et al., 1985). During this period, she joined the British Black Panthers' Youth Section and Sisters' Collective (Colin, et al., 2009).

Morris started squatting due to the difficulties she faced finding somewhere to live once she left both her family's home and foster care. She had long been in the council's housing waiting list; as noted in Chapter 4, however, it was especially hard for single, childless people to obtain council housing in the 1970s (Platt, 1980a, p. 99; Pettitt, 1980; Wates, 1980; Wates

³ For more information, see the original Remembering Olive Collective's website as well as the website of the second iteration of the collective, ROC 2.0 – at <https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com/> and <https://olivemorris.org/>, respectively (Remembering Olive Collective, 2009a; Remembering Olive Collective 2.0, 2019).

& Wolmar, 1980). ‘She had to squat because [the council] wouldn’t give her anywhere to live’, recalls Morris’ sister, Jennifer (Lewis, 2009, p. 9). ‘[I]f you didn’t have a child, [the council] wouldn’t think about you’ (Lewis, 2009, p. 9). Over time, according to Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, Morris ‘became well known in the community for her willingness to help other Black people who were facing difficulties, whether with the schools, the police, housing, social security officials or the courts’ (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 152). Faye Harrison – who squatted with Morris at 116 Dalberg Road and then at 60 Railton Road between 1974 and 1975 – remembers that homeless families would go to Morris with requests for assistance. Crucially, she noted that it was Morris *and* ‘her comrades’ who would then search for vacant houses or apartments, squat them, and move the families in (Harrison, 2011a, n.p.; Harrison, 2009; Harrison, 2011b).

121 and 65 Railton Road: The Beginnings of the Brixton Black Women’s Group

Exactly when the BBWG officially formed is a matter of debate. While some argue that it first came together in 1970, others maintain that it came together in 1973 or 1974 (Bogle, 1988; Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1977; Bryan, et al., 1985; Colin, et al., 2009; Fisher, 2012; Quashie, et al., 1990; Sudbury, 1998; Thomlinson, 2016). This is no doubt due in part to the vagaries of memory, but it also points to the different forms the group assumed at various points. What is generally agreed by members of the group is that, in 1970, women in the British Black Panther Movement (including Morris), the Black Liberation Organisation and the *Race Today* collective⁴ formed a study group which eventually led to the formation of the BBWG (Bean, 2009; Quashie, et al., 1990). As a former member told Fisher, ‘there were often discussions of Marx and Engels’ in the study group, as ‘many people were trying to grapple with those writings’ (Fisher, 2012, p. 71). The ‘lack of resources in the Black community’, according to BBWG member Marlene Bogle, ‘made it necessary for us to meet in each other’s homes ... as we had no other suitable place to do so’ (Bogle, 1988, p. 132).

Then, in 1973, Morris and Liz Obi squatted a disused launderette – the former Sunlight Laundry – at 121 Railton Road (Figure 6-3) (Colin, et al., 2009; Hurst, 2009). This was the

⁴ As noted – also in footnotes – in Chapters 2 and 5, the *Race Today* collective (so named after the journal they produced) was central to many struggles for racial liberation in Britain (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Waters, 2019). Its members included Jean Ambrose, Barbara Beese, Farrukh Dhondy, Patricia Dick, Leila Hassan, Darcus Howe, Gus John, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Akua Rugg and Mala Sen (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017; Waters, 2019). From 1973 to 1988, the collective’s journal was home to the work of the leading Black British intellectuals and activists of the time (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019). C.L.R. James lived above their Brixton offices (at 165-7 Railton Road) in his later years, until his death in 1989 (Donnell, 2002; Field, et al., 2019; Vasudevan, 2017).



Figure 6-3: 121 Railton Road c.1950, when it housed the Sunlight Laundry (Ideal Homes, n.d.).

first successful squatting of a private property in Lambeth – squatters usually occupied empty local authority housing rather than privately-owned properties, as private landlords were notorious for organizing swift and often violent and illegal evictions (Vasudevan, 2017; Wall, 2017; Wates & Wolmar, 1980).⁵ Morris and Obi resisted a number of evictions over the following months – it was during one of these eviction attempts that the photo of Morris featured on the cover of the 1979 edition of the *Squatters' Handbook* was taken (Colin, et al., 2009). While Morris and Obi occupied 121 Railton Road, the women's study group met there (Wolfe, 2011). In the face of growing police pressure, that same year Morris and Obi left 121 Railton Road and squatted a council property nearby, at number 65 Railton Road – and the women's study group began to meet at 65 Railton Road (Vasudevan, 2017; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c). Some time later, as *Race Today* collective member Akua Rugg told me, Morris moved to a squat in Brixton Hill, in which Rugg lived with her for a time. Morris left 65 Railton Road to the women's study group and, according to Rugg, over time it became known as 'the Black Women's house' (Ford, 2015, p. 136).

⁵ Although 121 Railton Road was privately owned when Morris and Obi squatted it, it was owned by Lambeth Council by the time the anarchist 121 Centre was evicted from it in 1999 (as detailed in Chapter 8). It is unclear exactly when the council purchased it, but it likely did so in the early 1980s (Fisher, 2012; mudlark121, 2019).

Some time after Morris and Obi moved out of 121 Railton Road, Morris helped a group of men and women from the British Black Panthers and the Black United Freedom Party to re-squat the building (Fisher, 2012). This group included several members of the women's study group (Bean, 2009; Hurst, 2009). At 121 Railton Road, the new squatters opened Sabarr, 'the bookshop that turned into a movement' (Fisher, 2012, p. 83). As BBWG member Gail Lewis recalls, 'Olive in fact got the Sabarr bookshop ... by going out as a part of the collective and *claiming* the building. In fact, when the council was going to evict them she went up onto the roof and said "I won't come down until you let us have the building"' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 45, emphasis mine). In addition to being a bookshop, Sabarr served as a meeting place and advice centre for local Black people involved in political organising (Vasudevan, 2017). Sabarr Books was opened, Gail Lewis argues, because, 'that was a time when we, as Black people, were particularly vocal ... in expressing the need for the learning and writing of our own history, literature being central, particularly resistance literature' (Quashie, et al., 1990, pp. 44-45). This, she recalls, 'related to the whole question about imperialism politics, where literature was seen as a part of the resistance struggle; you know, the decolonisation of the mind and all that' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 45). From Lewis' phrasing, it becomes clear that this process of 'decolonising the mind' involved more than the study of literature and history. It also involved the claiming of material space in which to do that. The claiming and establishing of such spaces was not simply about developing a sense of identity and community in the face of racist oppression; it signified an active challenge to that racism. This claiming brought its own risks: on the 15th of March 1973, Unity Bookshop – the first Black bookshop in Brixton, which was in a squat located at 74 Railton Road – was firebombed and burned to the ground in a racist attack (Beckles, 1998; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c). Sabarr was Brixton's second Black bookshop, and Unity's firebombing cannot have been far from the minds of the people using the space, running it and living in it – this included the women's study group. As well as meeting at 65 Railton Road, the group once again met at 121 Railton Road, this time 'in the room at the back' of Sabarr, as the bookshop was in the front (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46).

'We're here as a result of British imperialism': Asserting a right to space in Britain

As Lewis recalls, meeting in the room at the back of Sabarr was '[c]learly ... not satisfactory' – but, she added, 'it was a necessary step' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46). The squatted 'Black Women's house' at 65 Railton Road did not provide much more space, but the lack of resources

Bogle mentioned and the politics of the group meant that they made do with those squats during that period. ‘At that time’, explains Lewis, ‘we would have rejected [state] funding’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46). Many Black people involved in political organising at the time viewed the British state as a colonial formation and primary site of oppression, and so took an explicitly anti-statist stance (Sudbury, 1998; Waters, 2019). Thus, the group’s ‘demand’, according to Lewis, ‘was that there are empty houses; we have *a right* to them as Black folks, we’re going to take them’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46, emphasis mine).

Lewis’s phrasing is significant. Through it, we can consider the squatting of 65 and 121 Railton Road not only as a claiming of space, but as a powerful collective assertion by ‘Black folks’ of their *right* to space and presence in a nation that insistently disavows and unknowns its colonial history, and territorialises itself as white (Vimalassery, et al., 2016; McKittrick, 2006). Drawing on Katherine McKittrick’s work (2006) on Black women’s geographies in Canada, this disavowal can be seen to position Blackness as ‘surprising’ and ‘unexpected’, as not ‘here,’ as always ‘over there’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. 93). Blackness, McKittrick argues, is ‘concealed in a landscape of systemic blacklessness’ in nations like Canada (and the United Kingdom) (McKittrick, 2006, p. 93). Such a landscape is enforced in a number of registers – whether through immigration policies, police repression, and the commonly-held belief that Blackness in Britain is recent and only urban (Bressey, 2009; McKittrick, 2006).⁶

Significantly, such positionings of Blackness disavow not only the *presence* of Black people in Britain but also the coerced *labour* of Black people in the *making* of Britain. As Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe state, ‘[as] a people, we have rarely been accorded recognition for the part we have played in shaping this land ... Our links with this country ... stretch back over many hundreds of years. An understanding that the basis of these ties was – and remains – economic, is fundamental to any grasp of our lives in Britain today’ (Bryan, et al., 1985, pp. 2-3). Working towards and mobilising around these histories and ties was a political project that shaped the BBWG from very early on. According to Lewis, by the time the women’s study group moved to 121 Railton Road the aim of the group was for women ‘to get a space for themselves to look at the questions of colonialism and the nature of capitalist society, African history and these sorts of things’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 44).

For the BBWG’s members, asserting a right to space and presence was not an abstract political endeavour. It was a response to the conditions of their day-to-day life, which included

⁶ As noted in Chapter 8, however, Black histories of England are intimately connected to the rural, too (Bressey, 2009). The disavowal of these connections undergirds the continuing use of ‘the symbolism of rurality ... to justify racist imaginaries of England (and Britain)’ (Bressey, 2009, p. 390).

physical attacks: BBWG member Sona Osman told me of having bricks thrown through her family home's windows when she was growing up in Brixton, as part of a pattern of racist harassment; as an adult, someone tried to cut out her right eye with a broken bottle in a racist attack. 'If there was one thing we knew', she told me, 'it was racism'. In the early 1970s, as the BBWG was forming, Lewis recalls that 'the racial atmosphere was thick and threatening like anything could happen anytime ... [W]e started to see all that racist graffiti and KBW – *Keep Britain White* ... daubed on walls' (Lewis, 2009, p. 15).

It was during this period, while at Sabarr and 65 Railton Road, that the study group 'moved from the earlier days where we were about creating a space in which women could meet together, for whatever purposes, to being a Black women's organisation' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 51). Creating a space in which to meet together – a material space afforded by the squats at 65 and 121 Railton Road – was crucial to achieving this organisational autonomy and to asserting themselves as political actors challenging 'male domination and superiority' (Bean, 2009, p. 2). As Bean explains:

We were the women, we had the responsibilities, we were doing childcare, we were doing everything, and we should be recognized and should have a voice in the organizations, not just be their secretaries, all those issues, because that's where we were relegated – to take minutes and notes and give the coffee and the tea and so forth.

(Bean, 2009, p. 2)

In those early days, as the reading group became a campaigning organisation, '[w]e didn't even bother with a name. We were just the Black Women's Group' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 149). According to BBWG member Olive Gallimore, 'It was not until later that we sat down and decided who we were and wrote a position paper. It was not an overnight thing that you suddenly had one uniform concept of who we were. ... This is why the identity of the group involved at times a very deep and painful debating' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46). Being 'the first autonomous Black women's group of its kind, certainly in London', recall Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 'there were no models for us to follow, no paths laid out. We just had to work it out as we went along' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 150).

Following on from the discussions described by Gallimore, the group declared itself a socialist feminist organisation. This collective identity did not simply reflect the identity of its members, but was actively formed through constant deliberation: 'Some women', recalls Lewis, 'may not have said that they were socialists as individuals but the group always said it

was socialist' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 47). This approach extended to other political positions – including the group's use of the terms 'Black'. Crucially, the BBWG organised on the grounds of 'political Blackness' (Bryan, et al., 1985; Sudbury, 1998). 'Political Blackness', for the group, centred on historical experiences of colonialism and imperialism, modern forms of racism and economic exclusion, and to non-white women's location in Britain (Fisher, 2012; Sudbury, 1998; Swaby, 2014). 'When we use the term "Black"', wrote Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 'we use it as a political term. It doesn't describe our skin colour, it defines our situation here in Britain. We're here as a result of British imperialism' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 170). The group's members included women from and with ties to the Caribbean, Asia and Africa (Sisters in Study, 1988). They worked together in the understanding that their struggles were both grounded in the specificities of their location in London and part of global networks of resistance (Sudbury, 1998). '[T]he greatest threat to Black people [in Britain are] the organised attacks, physical and psychological, by the British state', wrote the BBWG (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1979b, p. 2); and, as BBWG member Amina Mama put it, these 'struggle[s] against racism and white supremacy ... in the imperial heartlands – in the inner cities in the belly of the beast' were connected to 'the battlefield of liberation struggles in Africa' (Mama, 1995, p. 6). Drawing on McKittrick, we can consider the BBWG's deployment of political Blackness as 'not simply a matter of placing blackness within' Britain, but as 'exhibit[ing] stories, places, and spaces ... through and beyond the nation-state' (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 102-103). Crucially, as we have seen, in the case of the BBWG and its members this was often enacted through the claiming of actual, material squatted spaces.

The BBWG's diasporic collective identity required sustained dialogue and negotiation, and was often a cause of the 'deep and painful debating' Gallimore referred to. According to Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 'Our group organises on the basis of Afro-Asian unity, and although the principle is maintained, we don't deal with it by avoiding the problems this might present, but by having on-going discussions' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 170).⁷ Thus, the members of the BBWG claimed a space and organised together *as Black women*, but their deployment of this was far from static or ahistoric. Drawing on McKittrick, this category is 'intimately connected with past and present spatial organization and ... bound up in an ongoing geographic struggle' (McKittrick, 2006, p. xviii) – in the BBWG's case, a struggle waged in large part out of squats.

⁷ For in-depth analyses of the uses, limits and tensions presented by the concept of political Blackness, see Sudbury's *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (1998) and Nydia Swaby's "'Disparate in voice, sympathetic in direction": Gendered political blackness and the politics of solidarity' (2014).

'... this funny racialised and racist divide between what constituted feminist activism and what wasn't ...'

The BBWG's struggle against white supremacy and racism was also waged against the wider women's liberation movement. Squatting was a way for the BBWG to create spaces to organise autonomously from the (white) feminist movement, within which many of its members had experienced racism. According to BBWG member Melba Wilson, '[the B]BWG set itself up to be an autonomous Black organisation ... [T]hat was partly because some ... members had been involved with white women's organisations ... and had come away feeling very disillusioned by the racism that they found within them' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 48). Due to 'the continued failure of the women's liberation movement to acknowledge racism as a central plank of analyses of self and community', wrote BBWG member Claudette Williams, many Black women in Britain – including some members of the BBWG – distanced themselves from the term 'feminist', as they considered feminism to be 'a European/Western idea that has nothing to do with the lives of black women' (Williams, 1993, p. 162).⁸ At stake in these conflicts was more than 'inclusion' into feminism in any simple sense; what was being asked was not for Black women 'to be grafted onto "feminism" in a tokenistic manner' (Carby, 1982, p. 232). Rather, feminism – its insights, critiques and demands – had to be fundamentally transformed (Carby, 1982). As Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe explained,

when the Women's Liberation Movement took up the issue of 'Abortion on Demand' in the early seventies, Black women had to point out that we have always been given abortions more readily than white women and are indeed often encouraged to have terminations we didn't ask for. It's for this reason, too, that when the women's movement demanded 'free, safe, and available contraception for all women', we had to remind them that for Black women this often means being used as guinea-pigs in mass birth control programmes, or as objects of 'research' when new forms of birth control need to be tested. And when the same women talked about 'A Woman's Right to Choose', we responded that for Black women, this must also mean having the right to choose to *have* our children, planned or unplanned.

(Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 105)

⁸ Among the terms used by Black women instead was 'womanist', as this term was considered to come from 'a black "rootsy" tradition' and to better address their position and concerns (Williams, 1993, p. 162; Sudbury, 1998). '[W]omanism', wrote Sudbury, 'cannot be defined without reference to opposition to racism' (Sudbury, 1998, p. 47). 'Writing as a womanist', she argued, 'declares that I refuse to subsume "race" to class or gender, but that I equally refuse to wait until racism is defeated before raising issues of gender' (Sudbury, 1998, p. 47).

An earlier article in the fifth issue of *Speak Out* similarly noted that seeing feminism as ‘a panacea for all types of oppression ... fail[ed] to analyse the life of black women’ (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1983c, p. 23). Thus, although BBWG as a group *did* identify as feminist, they emphasised that they were ‘Black socialist feminists’ (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984a, p. 89; Quashie, et al., 1990). They explained this emphasis on the grounds that,

as black women we are strongly influenced by the knowledge that our countries of origin, the so-called ‘Third World’, having been actively underdeveloped by *colonialism* (a part of capitalism), are even now being raped and pillaged under the stranglehold of *imperialism* (yet another, and to us very relevant, aspect of capitalism). ... It is therefore impossible for us to consider the oppression of women separately from the international oppression by imperialism of our countries of origin, and our experience, even here in Britain, of racism which moulds the life of our whole community.

(Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984b, p. 254)

The BBWG noted that where ‘[r]adical feminism contends that the oppression of women is the major and primary oppression in all societies’, they, as a group, did not (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984b, p. 253; Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1977). Thus, although they organised *autonomously*, they were not *separatist*, and so organised jointly with Black men on specific campaigns – especially around policing, which affected all Black people (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984b; Lewis, 2011; Waters, 2019).⁹ This stance, the group noted, was ‘quite different’ from the radical feminist project ‘to create change for women, in isolation from men’ (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984b, p. 253). Such interventions were often stubbornly resisted by radical feminists (Sudbury, 1998).¹⁰ As Lewis recalls,

[there was] this funny divide, this funny notion that somehow black women’s organisations were not part of the Women’s Liberation Movement, with this funny racialised and racist divide between what constituted feminist activism and what wasn’t, there was this whole idea that somehow our group [BBWG] and at the time, believe it or not, Southall Black Sisters and Harlesden Asian Women’s Group and East London Black Women’s Organisation, etc, etc, etc, all of them, Haringey Black Sisters, Camden Black Sisters, somehow they were not deemed part of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

(Lewis, 2011, p. 108)¹¹

⁹ The BBWG distinguished between *autonomy* and *separatism* by arguing that ‘[a]n autonomous movement creates a favourable climate for understanding and evaluating the intricacies involved with the question of the liberation of a particular group; which, in turn, makes it possible to expand the *whole* political struggle’ (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1984b, pp. 252-253, emphasis mine).

¹⁰ ‘White feminists’, wrote Sudbury, ‘made counter-allegations that black women were promoting a divisive separatism which was in effect reverse/black racism’ (Sudbury, 1998, p. 201). They also ‘accused black women of ... “watering down” feminism’ and even of being ‘anti-feminist’ (Sudbury, 1998, p. 201).

¹¹ Due to these and other factors, there were also long-running arguments among Black women as to whether their organising *should* be considered part of the feminist movement, or whether it should be more firmly ‘located within black struggle’

Thus, although as with radical feminist organising squats were a key part of the infrastructure which supported the BBWG's endeavours, the BBWG's work, politics and spaces were enacted and co-constituted very differently to those of the squatted radical feminist communities explored by Tobin and Wall (Tobin, 2017a; Tobin, 2017b; Wall, 2017). In exploring the ways in which squatting has intersected with and enabled feminist organising, the tensions between and spatialisations of different strands of feminism must be attended to.

'Daily battles' in 'Britain's Black utopia'

One of the key issues the BBWG organised around was the policing and criminalisation of Black people – described by Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe as 'our daily battles with the police' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 155). Using the 'search under suspicion' powers granted by Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrancy Act (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1824), 'the police were able to stop, search and arrest anybody on the basis of a mere suspicion' that they might *intend* to commit an offence (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 159; Ford, 2015; Jackson, 2015).¹² As an article in the second issue of *Speak Out* noted, these powers (popularly known as the 'sus laws', with 'sus' being a colloquial abbreviation of 'suspicion') were disproportionately used against Black people as a tool of racist harassment (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1979a; Ford, 2015; Jackson, 2015).¹³ Instances of harassment on the part of the police in Brixton were often challenged by witnesses, even though such challenges carried the risk of arrest: '[S]o many people', recalled BBWG member Judith Lockhart, 'got arrested and hauled into police stations or ended up in prison, because you would be walking along the street and you would challenge the police ... "Why you messing around with this young person or why you doing this?"' (Lockhart, 2009, p. 36; Bryan, et al., 1985; Ford, 2015; Humphry, 1972). Lockhart herself engaged in this type of resistance: 'I've done it, you know, a few times' (Lockhart, 2009, p. 36). The policing and criminalisation of Black people included the policing of Black children

(Sudbury, 1998, p. 205). Increasing fragmentation over this issue has been noted as one of the factors which led to the demise of OWAAD in 1982 (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1984a; Sudbury, 1998). Here, the point remains that squatting enabled Black women to organise autonomously, whether identifying as feminists or not.

¹² It is worth reiterating that, as noted in Chapter 2, in addition to giving police the power to stop, search and arrest anyone they so much as suspected of intending to commit an offence, Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 criminalised 'every person wandering abroad and lodging in any barn or outhouse, or in any deserted or unoccupied building, or in the open air, or under a tent, or in any cart or waggon', as well as 'every person being found in ... any inclosed [sic] ... area, for any unlawful purpose' (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1824, c.83). Thus, Section 4 has been used – albeit rarely – against squatters (Wates & Wolmar, 1980).

¹³ The BBWG's focus on policing, according to Lewis, was 'one of the reasons why there was such tension' with radical feminists (Lewis, 2011, p. 110). According to Lewis, 'this form of state activity that is so profoundly oppressive of a whole swathe of people' was not, in the eyes of many radical feminists, 'a legitimate site of feminist activism ... Other forms of state oppression ... like around reproductive rights [were], but policing is not' (Lewis, 2011, p. 110).

in schools: ‘Even when our children were at school’, recount Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, ‘we could expect the police to be called into the playground to break up fights or to sort out minor incidents’ (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 159). Black pupils were also subjected to ‘bussing’ – a practice stemming from a 1965 Department of Education and Science policy which encouraged local education authorities to disperse (using buses, if necessary) ‘immigrant’ children from schools in which they constituted more than one third of the enrolment, as the concentration of ‘immigrant’ children above this level was deemed to be a ‘racial imbalance’ (Killian, 1979; Lewis, 2009; Sudbury, 1998). The term ‘immigrant’ was used as a euphemism for ‘non-white’ – many of the dispersed children were born in Britain but were still considered ‘immigrants’ (Lewis, 2009; Benson, 1981). In this context, Black pupils were also disproportionately labelled as ‘educationally sub-normal’ and referred to ‘disruptive units’ (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1980a; Bryan, et al., 1985; Lockhart, 2009; Sudbury, 1998). As part of their organising around these issues, the BBWG were involved in setting up supplementary schools for Black children on the weekends (Bean, 2009; Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1979b; Bryan, et al., 1985; Lockhart, 2009; Williams, 1993).

As Rebecca Solnit, the collective Out of the Woods and others have observed, when prevailing social orders temporarily fail – for example, in the wake of a hurricane or an earthquake – a range of ‘extraordinary communities’, composed through collectivity and mutual aid, often emerge in response (Solnit, 2009; Out of the Woods, 2018). These ‘disaster communities’ mobilise survival tactics (often developed over generations) to resist and survive disasters both extraordinary and ordinary, *within, against* and *beyond* the prevailing social order (Out of the Woods, 2018). It is crucial to remember that, for many, the everyday – the prevailing social order – *is* disaster (Sharpe, 2016; Federici, 2010). The violence, dispersal and containment that Black people experienced in Brixton at the hands of agents of the state and others are but some of the forms of the quotidian disaster of life in the wake of colonialism (Sharpe, 2016). Brixton, in being transformed by the work of local residents – including organisations like the BBWG – into ‘Britain’s Black utopia’ (Tulloch, 2000, p. 231) must be recognised as a ‘disaster community’ of the everyday.¹⁴ Violence, dispersal and containment

¹⁴ McKittrick argues that, often, ‘the only recognized geographic relevancy permitted to black subjects in the diaspora is that of dispossession and social segregation’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. 5). This, she contends, reifies particular ‘mappings’ that locate Black women in, for example, “‘bad’/black neighborhoods’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. 13). These were understandings which, as noted in Chapter 4, certainly applied to Brixton in the white English popular imagination of the time. Such mappings of Blackness, McKittrick argues, are limiting and deterministic, because they de-emphasise other spatial experiences and imaginations (McKittrick, 2006). In calling attention to this violence, it is thus also imperative to denaturalise it and to emphasise that it was challenged. Further, such challenges cannot be abstracted from the kinds of demands for radical change that the BBWG made. They should not be romanticised as simply acts of ‘resilience’, as resilience can often be mobilised to dehistoricise and depoliticise precarity and injustice, and to defer demands for change (Diprose, 2015).

were met by the development of a rich infrastructure which included a number of spaces of resistance and community. These included squats, which played a vital role in sustaining this infrastructure, as did a variety of other spaces. According to BBWG member Dorothea Smartt, ‘Brixton was a kind of hub. It was a two-minute walk from my house on Nursery Road to Brixton tube station, but some days it could take me twenty-five minutes to get there because of all the people I’d meet on the way’ (SuAndi, et al., 2017, p. 145). Churches and hairdressing salons became a meeting point for many Black women: going was an opportunity to exchange information and support each other (Bryan, et al., 1985; Williams, 1993). ‘[M]ore often than not’, recall Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, ‘the salon would be based in somebody’s front parlour, since no European hairstylist would cater for our particular needs’ (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 131). Women, argued Williams, ‘drew on survival techniques brought from home’ (Williams, 1993, p. 154). Chief among these survival techniques was the ‘sou sou’, or ‘pardner hand’, through which Black communities in London saved collectively in order to help families raise down payments for houses (Williams, 1993). According to Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, ‘[i]t was mainly women who set up the pardners. Nine out of ten of the pardners schemes had a woman in charge of them’ (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 131). Squatting, in this context, must be considered as one survival technique among many; as one claim to space in a vast network of practices and spaces of resistance and community – from ‘sou sou’ collectives to hairdressing salons, from supplementary schools to churches. This may be why members of the BBWG have largely not dwelt on squatting in and of itself. They *do* discuss spaces squatted by the group, although mostly without explicitly articulating them as such.

Over time, the BBWG became part of networks of resistance at both a national and international level. In 1975, Morris moved from Brixton – where she was living in a squat at 2 Talma Road – to Manchester, to study for a BA in Economic and Social Studies at the University of Manchester (Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c; Tsang, 2019). There, she helped set up the Manchester Black Women’s Cooperative and the Black Women’s Mutual Aid Group, as well as a supplementary school and a Black bookshop. Through her involvement, the BBWG established strong links with these groups (Bryan, et al., 1985; Lewis, 2011). In 1978, while still living in Manchester, Morris co-founded OWAAD – an ‘umbrella’ organisation composed of (politically) Black feminist groups from all over Britain. It was the first national Black women’s organisation in the United Kingdom (Scafe, 2002b). Through Morris, the BBWG joined OWAAD, playing a key role in its development and going on to make links with women’s groups internationally (Brixton Black Women’s Group, 1983b; Bryan, et al., 1985; Scafe, 2002a; Sudbury, 1998).



Figure 6-4: The BBWG was part of a thriving, politically radical scene at Railton Road.

41 Stockwell Green: ‘We want a centre of our own’

At Railton Road, as noted in Chapter 5, the BBWG was part of a thriving radical scene (Figure 6-4). The Squatters’ Union was next to number 65, and there were two (predominantly white) women’s squatted centres – at numbers 80 and 207 (Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting, 2014; Ford, 2015; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c; mudlark121, 2018; urban75, 2012a).¹⁵ The *Race Today* collective was based at numbers 165–7 (Vasudevan, 2017). The Brixton Gay Community was there as well (Cook, 2013). Railton Road was also home to the offices of the newspapers *People’s News Service* and *Brixton’s Own Boss*, as well as the food co-op Brixton Whole Foods – with all three being based in squats (Ford, 2015; Hurst,

¹⁵ According to Platt, the Brixton Women’s Centre at 207 Railton Road became a focus for squatting advice and assistance (Platt, 1980c). Platt argues that, as of 1975, it was responsible for the squatting of 300 empty *private* dwellings, and that it sometimes received as many as 30-40 referrals in one week from Lambeth’s Social Services Department (Platt, 1980c; Platt, 1980d).

2009). The British Black Panthers were based in a house just off Railton Road, at 38 Shakespeare Road (Colin, et al., 2009).

As the BBWG grew, having sufficient space for the group to meet and organise became a pressing issue. '[W]e thought, "We want a centre of our own,"' recalled Lewis, 'and we searched the area' (Lewis, 2011, p. 127). According to Bogle, '[i]t took a long time to find suitable premises' (Bogle, 1988, p. 133). Eventually, the BBWG decided on a building: a squatted house located at 41 Stockwell Green, which they moved into in 1975 (Bogle, 1988; Brixton Black Women's Group, 1980b; Brixton Black Women's Group, 1984a; Lewis, 2011). It was while at 41 Stockwell Green that serious, often heated discussions began to take place on whether or not the BBWG should apply for funding from the local authorities (Fisher, 2012). As Lewis remembers it, '[T]here were many long and important discussions about whether an organisation like ours – one that was supposed to be revolutionary, ... and centrally supposed to be critical of the state ... [H]ow could we take money from the state?' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 46). Eventually, the group decided to accept funding from the GLC's Inner Area Partnership Scheme (Fisher, 2012; Laybourn, 2006).

41 Stockwell Green's transition from a squatted to a non-squatted space has not received much attention in accounts of the BBWG. When it has been addressed, it is not surprising – given the intricacies of the GLC's and Lambeth Council's policies with regard to squatting, short-life licensing and the funding of community groups – that there has been some confusion on the matter (see Chapter 4). Thus, although Fisher understood the BBWG to have 'purchased' the building with the funding they received from the GLC, the group in fact obtained a short-life licence from Lambeth Council (Fisher, 2012, p. 89; Lewis, 2011). As Lewis recalled in a 2011 interview, the BBWG 'negotiated with the council to get a very low licence on [the building]' and it was only '*later on* [that the BBWG] got a grant' (Lewis, 2011, p. 127, emphasis mine).¹⁶ The group made this transition 'as it was impossible to initiate any long-term projects, owing to the lack of a permanent base', explained Bogle (Bogle, 1988, p. 133).¹⁷ 'As Black women organizing,' she added, 'we realized that we needed a permanent

¹⁶ The language used on this matter by the BBWG members interviewed by Fisher appears to have been quite ambiguous. In the segment of the interview quoted by Fisher, they stated that '[t]he house *came from* Lambeth Council' and that the BBWG '*got* the house' (Fisher, 2012, p. 115, emphases mine). Given the convoluted context of short-life licenses (as well as how much time has passed since this all took place), their use of these open-ended terms over more specific terms such as 'buying', 'purchasing' or even 'renting' becomes more clear. In light of Lewis' account, however, the clarification on the part of Fisher's interviewees that '[t]he house came from Lambeth Council (Stockwell Road). [*Then*] at some point . . . *There was some funding involved*' can be appreciated as a small clue pointing to a short-life licensing arrangement rather than a purchase (Fisher, 2012, p. 115, emphasis mine).

¹⁷ The BBWG were not alone in struggling with the lack of security that not having long-term, stable premises in which to organise entailed. As historian Eve Setch has observed, such 'impermanence was significant' for feminist groups during that period, in that they were 'always fighting off crises, rather than having the security to focus on more fundamental issues' (Setch, 2002, p. 175).

base inside the community’ (Bogle, 1988, p. 133). Those who argued in favour of state funding and no longer squatting suggested that funding and the relative security of a short-life license would enable the BBWG to put theory into practice in different ways – by permitting them, for example, to provide a crèche for women, to host reading groups, to provide contraception and pregnancy advice and to offer other community-based groups a stable space in which to organise (Fisher, 2012, p. 89; Laybourn, 2006). These decisions did not put an end to the arguments that preceded them, however. Morris was a vocal critic of these changes and seems to have distanced herself from the BBWG to an extent as a result (Quashie, et al., 1990). It appears her position – as well as that of others in the group – was that the state should provide housing, but that campaigning groups and their spaces should remain autonomous from the state in order to be able to critique and resist it. ‘Olive [Morris] insisted that she be statemented as saying she did not want to be a part of this [new dynamic]’, remembers Gallimore, ‘based on a political analysis of the state getting involved in the lives of Black people and buying them off’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 48).

The Brixton Black Women’s Centre

In the summer of 1978, after completing her studies in Manchester, Morris moved back to Brixton and began work in the juvenile department of the Brixton Community Law Centre (Allotey, 2012; Colin, et al., 2009; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009d). During this period, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (Allotey, 2012; Ford, 2015). Also during this period, after years of waiting, she was offered council housing – Flat 2 at 182 Clapham Park Road (Remembering Olive Collective, 2009c; Remembering Olive Collective, 2009e). Morris died on the 12th of July 1979, at the age of 27 (Allotey, 2012). The BBWG organised a meeting on Sunday the 29th of July to ‘pay tribute to her selfless and unrelenting contribution to the struggles of Black people in particular, but also of oppressed people and workers throughout the world’ (Remembering Olive Collective, 2009e).

Sometime between July 1979 and September 1980 – different accounts offer different dates – the Mary Seacole Craft Group joined forces with the BBWG; using the funding obtained from the GLC, together they opened a Black women’s centre at 41 Stockwell Green (Figures Figure 6-5 and Figure 6-6) (Bogle, 1988; Laybourn, 2006; Scafe, 2002a; Sudbury, 1998; Thomlinson, 2016). Initially named Mary Seacole House, the centre was later re-named the Brixton Black Women’s Centre (Scafe, 2002a). It was Britain’s first Black women’s centre,

The Black Womens Group and Mary Seacole Craft Group - Brixton, will shortly be opening a Black Womens Centre at 41 STOCKWELL GREEN, SW9.

MARY SEACOLE HOUSE



The aim of the Black Womens Centre will be to give support and help to Black Women in the Community in different ways. We will be dealing with some of the specific problems we face as Black Women, such as racism, sexism and class oppression. In addition we will be running a Craft Workshop and Playgroup.

The Centre will further be developed to provide up-to-date information on all aspects of women rights and benefits. Our programme of work will include our political development, through discussions, seminars and exchange with other Womens' Groups.

These are some of the uses to which the Centre will be put. We hope to establish a permanent base where women with different experiences can become involved in the Centre and make their contributions.

At present, work is being carried out on the house and we will let you know well in advance when the Centre will be officially opened.

The Black Womens Group now meets at the House (41 Stockwell Green, SW9) at 3:pm on Sundays, for weekly meetings.

For further information — Phone 274-9220.

Figure 6-5: Announcement ahead of the opening of Mary Seacole House in the third issue of the BBWG's newsletter, *Speak Out* (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1980b).

and it became a focal point for the meeting of Black women's groups and political organisations from across London (Fisher, 2012; Scafe, 2002a; Sudbury, 1998; Thomlinson, 2016). The Centre became the postal address for OWAAD; notably, in the aftermath of the April 1981 Brixton uprising, it also became the headquarters of the Brixton Defence Campaign's Legal Defence Group (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1983b; Quashie, et al., 1990; Sudbury, 1998; Thomlinson, 2016; Waters, 2019).¹⁸ The Centre also hosted a regular welfare rights information and referral service (run by BBWG member and lawyer Clover Graham), a health group and children's activities during school holidays (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1983b; Bryan & Bean, 2012; Lewis, 2011).

The BBWG continued to attract new members throughout this period (Mama, 1995; SuAndi, et al., 2017). Still, the rifts which began with the decision to apply for funding and a short-life license remained. Morris' reservations about these decisions proved prescient. Receiving funding, Lewis argued, meant that 'we became a bloody management committee with workers – we became employers' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52; Fisher, 2012). Further, as

¹⁸ Working with men – in the Brixton Black Women's Centre – as part of the Brixton Defence Campaign presented the BBWG with deeply spatialised challenges. Although the BBWG provided the space for the Legal Defence Group to meet, Lewis remembered that BBWG members 'still had to make it known that we had something to say; that we were not just the providers of space ... and the people who did the typing. We still had to fight to be heard' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 49). '[E]ven though all the meetings were held in the Brixton Black Women's Centre that we'd squatted, we'd set up, ... we'd laboured to secure', she remembered, 'they were trying to put us to the back and trying to suggest that questions of feminism were not directly relevant' (Lewis, 2011, p. 91).



Figure 6-6: Mural on the wall of the Brixton Black Women's Centre at 41 Stockwell Green, as seen from Combermere Road. When it first opened, the Centre was named Mary Seacole House, and an image of Mary Seacole can be seen at the very top of the mural (Department of Town Planning, 1986).

noted in Chapter 4, short-life licenses came with the proviso that the groups they were granted to committed themselves to vacating their premises when requested to do so by the council (Blundy, 2014; Bowman, 2004; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Kearns, 1979; Platt, 1980a). Becoming a funded, non-squatted women's centre meant, Lewis remembers, that '[w]e stopped doing the things that we used to do' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52; Fisher, 2012). Fisher notes that the BBWG found itself having to 'justify its existence' in order to retain its funding (and, presumably, its short-life license) (Fisher, 2012, p. 116). [T]he bureaucratic tasks that result from becoming accountable to funders,' according to Mama, 'took over' (Mama, 1995, p. 5). One BBWG member told Fisher that 'the BBWG was unable to criticize the state because the organization was using its funds' (Fisher, 2012, p. 89).



Figure 6-7: The Brixton Black Women's Centre at 41 Stockwell Green, as seen in 1996 (Friedrichs, 1996).

The group never fully recovered from the tensions created by negotiating with Lambeth Council and receiving GLC funding. 'So', explains Lewis, 'we had to separate formally' – and the Brixton Black Women's Group separated from the Brixton Black Women's Centre (Lewis, 2011, p. 128). Eventually, as a result of local authority budget cuts, the Brixton Black Women's Centre lost their GLC funding (Sudbury, 1998). During this period, they also lost their short-life license, and 41 Stockwell Green was condemned by Lambeth Council (Sudbury, 1998, p. 248). In addition to this, members of the BBWG were also struggling with 'the effect of losing certain sisters' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52). '[T]he death of Olive [Morris], the death of Sylvia [Erike] and others was quite a devastating experience', remembered Gallimore, adding that 'some people were just physically exhausted' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52). '[I]t is hard to get across the level of intensity during that period', explained Wilson (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52). 'It required a lot from all of us, in addition to the rest of our lives ... working and living and families and children and that kind of thing' (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52). Due to the combination of these factors, both the BBWG and the Centre disbanded sometime between 1985 and 1988 (Fisher, 2012; Scafe, 2002a; Sudbury, 1998). 41 Stockwell Green was demolished some time during or after 1996 (Figure 6-7); an apartment complex called 'Draymans Court' now stands in its place (Friedrichs, 1996; Google, 2020; Sudbury, 1998).

The group were ‘victim’, recalls Lewis, ‘of not only the internal dynamics of [the B]BWG but also the fracturing of Black political activity; the fracturing ... of women’s liberation political activity and the general political environment [under Thatcher]’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52). Arguably, this marked *an* end for the group, rather than *the* end: as Osman told me, many of the members continued to meet in reading groups in each other’s homes, and many remain in touch to this day. According to Wilson, in a ‘sense [the BBWG] has not finished, because all those people who went through [it] in those early years remain committed to its principles, to its ideals, and conduct their lives in that way. ... So in that sense [the BBWG] lives’ (Quashie, et al., 1990, p. 52).

Conclusion

As Fisher has noted, applying for and working with state funding led a number of community-based Black women’s organisations in the 1980s into ‘a vicious cycle of dependency’ (Fisher, 2012, p. 117). The compliance reporting required to maintain the funding they had grown dependent on overwhelmed many such organisations (Fisher, 2012). Further, many felt they risked losing their funding if they challenged local and central government too vocally. Sudbury, however, warns against establishing a firm, direct and reductive causal link between receiving local or central government funding and co-optation, censorship and depoliticisation (Sudbury, 1998). Such an understanding, she argues, fails to take into account the ways in which receiving funding from central government enabled many Black organisations to challenge local authorities; it also fails to account for the highly politicised government-funded organisations she encountered during her research (Sudbury, 1998). Working autonomously, she noted, led to many women being emotionally and financially drained. ‘[R]egardless of how effective our organisations are’, she contended, ‘we will not be able to change legislation, take political power at a national level or make macro-level economic changes through autonomous organising alone’ (Sudbury, 1998, p. 181). For many of the women and organisations she studied, claiming their *right* to local authority and central government funding was experienced as ‘a highly political statement of black women’s right to self determination’ (Sudbury, 1998, p. 77). Drawing on Fisher and Sudbury, government-funded Black women’s organisations might thus be understood as working ‘in and against the State’ (Fisher, 2012, p. 117).

Thus, although it would be unhelpful to make sweeping and essentialising arguments about the effects on autonomous organisations of accepting government funding, many BBWG members experienced this as precisely co-optation, censorship and depoliticisation. ‘I think

that was in the end inevitably the death of us’, observed Lewis (Lewis, 2011, p. 128). ‘[Y]ou do change your character if you become part of the huge swathe in Britain of voluntary sector services ... or non-statutory sector services’ (Lewis, 2011, p. 128). While she was careful to note that these services ‘deliver so much information and support’, ultimately, she proposed, ‘that’s not the same as a campaigning organization’ (Lewis, 2011, p. 128). As noted above, a BBWG member interviewed by Fisher spoke of the sense that the BBWG was no longer able to criticise the state; further, as Mama explained, the activities required for the BBWG to maintain the funding it had grown dependent on took over the centre’s day-to-day work.

This chapter has pieced together a historical and political geography of the BBWG by spatialising the history, politics, struggles, terms, identifications, connections and tensions the BBWG worked through. It has located the BBWG’s emergence in the contexts of geographical struggles around the ongoing violences of colonialism. Squatting and the struggle for housing, in this context, cannot be disentangled from struggles against the policing, criminalisation, dispersal and containment of Black people in the streets, in schools, at the border and in their homes, among a range of other locations. Squatting, in this context, must be considered as one survival technique among many; as one claim to space in a vast network of practices and spaces of resistance and community – from ‘sou sou’ collectives to hairdressing salons, from supplementary schools to churches. Still, squatting, presented the BBWG with specific challenges and limitations – they worked with the constant threat of eviction and were unable to embark on long-term projects that would have required a stable base for the group. Squatting, however, enabled the group to come together, to achieve organisational autonomy, to assert a right to space and presence in a nation that insistently disavows its colonial history (and present), and to work and develop in concert with their core anti-state, decolonial and feminist politics. The tensions and dynamics which followed the group’s decision to stop squatting and accept local authority funding make this clear.

In attending to the BBWG, its spaces, its politics and its work, this chapter expands the ways in which squatting in England has been understood. The BBWG’s work, politics and spaces were enacted and co-constituted very differently to those, for example, of the squatted radical feminist communities at the centre of recent academic work. In exploring the ways in which squatting has intersected with and enabled feminist organising, the tensions between and spatialisations of different strands of feminism must be attended to. More broadly, the meanings, deployments and resonances of squatting, when considered through the histories, struggles dynamics and forms of resistance the BBWG was emmeshed in, are deeply distinct from those explored in the literature on squatting in England thus far.

25 years after Olive Morris and Liz Obi first squatted 121 Railton Road, the building, still a squat, would once again be the generative site of intense political explorations and contestations – this time, at the nexus of anarchist, queer and pagan politics. It is to that project that the next chapter turns.

ASIDE: 372 Coldharbour Lane: ‘The Old Dole Office’ / CoolTan

As noted in Chapter 4, up to 242 of the 492 passengers of the *Empire Windrush* were accommodated in Clapham Common Underground Station upon their arrival in 1948 (Ramdin, 2017 [1987]). From there, they sought work via the nearest Labour Exchange, which happened to be in Brixton’s Coldharbour Lane – thus marking the beginning of Caribbean settlement in Brixton (DeHanas, 2016). According to Donald Hinds, over time the sight of Caribbean men gathered outside the Labour Exchange at 372 Coldharbour Lane became a familiar one (Hinds, 1980). However, ‘few looking on,’ argues Hinds, ‘understood the crushing loneliness’ these men experienced, constantly being made into ‘a distinctive minority ... forever ... in exile’ (Hinds, 1980, p. 50). The area outside the Labour Exchange became an important space of solidarity for this emerging community, where men ‘congregated ... to remember and to forget’ (Hinds, 1980, p. 50).

It is unclear when the building at 372 Coldharbour Lane stopped functioning as an unemployment benefits office. By 1992, however, it had been abandoned, and was known in Brixton as the ‘Old Dolehouse’ (urban75, 2012b). It was then squatted by the CoolTan Arts collective, becoming ‘the beating heart of Brixton’s arts and activist scene’ (Figure 6-8) (Urban, 2018).

The CoolTan Arts collective formed in Brixton in June 1991, adopting the name of the CoolTan Suntan Lotion factory they were squatting at 67 Effra Road (urban75, 2012b).^{*} Evicted from the factory in February 1992, they moved into offices at 435–437 Coldharbour Lane before squatting the ‘Old Dolehouse’ in September 1992 (urban75, 2012b; urban75, 2012c). According to Kath (a long-time squatter and Queeruption organiser featured in Chapter 7), a café was set up at the ‘Old Dolehouse’, as were music rehearsal rooms, darkrooms and an art space (Figure 6-9) (urban75, n.d.). Free or cheap workshops and classes took place there – ranging, as Kath recalled, from photography to yoga. The building – which became known simply as ‘CoolTan’ – also hosted groups such as Reclaim the Streets and became an important base for organising against the Criminal Justice Act of 1994 (urban75, 2012b; Urban, 2018).



Figure 6-8: CoolTan in 1995 (urban75, n.d.).



Figure 6-9: The ‘Party Room’ in CoolTan, 1994 (urban75, 2003).

In September 1995, CoolTan was evicted (urban75, 2012b; Urban, 2018). The ‘Old Dolehouse’ was demolished in May 2007 (urban75, 2012b). The land was acquired by Barratt Homes for an apartment and office complex branded ‘Brixton Square’ (later renamed ‘Milles Square & Carney Place’) (Figure 6-10) (Steele, 2013; Urban, 2013c). The development became, for many, emblematic of the accelerated gentrification of Brixton in the 2010s (Steele, 2013). Although planning application for the site was granted on the proviso that a development would include a number of social housing units, ** Barratt Homes later reneged on this commitment (Lambeth Council, 2013; Steele, 2013).

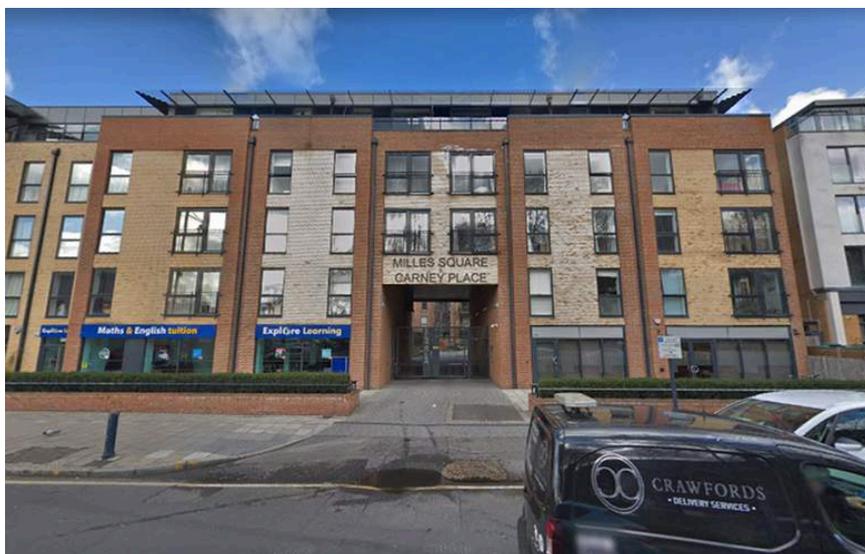


Figure 6-10: Milles Square & Carney Place, on the site where CoolTan stood (Google, 2019a).

* A photo of the CoolTan Suntan Lotion factory can be viewed at <http://www.urban75.org/photos/protest/cool100.html>. An apartment complex, Bailey Mews, now stands in its place.

** ‘Social housing’ is usually owned and managed by local councils or housing associations. It is allocated on the basis of need, and usually provides long-term tenancies as well as greater protections from eviction. Social housing is typically cheaper to rent than privately-rented housing or ‘affordable housing’, as social rents are pegged to local incomes in order to keep rents more affordable, whereas so-called ‘affordable’ rents are set at up to 80% of the market rate (Shelter, n.d.).

Chapter 7 / ‘What we need to do is create our own space and terrorize those pseudo-pervy capitalists’: Anarchism, queer squatted spaces and 1990s Brixton

Introduction

‘[D]id you pick this shit up in Gay and Lesbian Studies or where? Maybe your problem is that you came out in an era when queer people spend more time theorizing than they do in the sack’

Jack Prosper, *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* (Queen, 1998, p. 101).

In the summer of 1998, a flyer began circulating around London (Figures Figure 7-1 and Figure 7-2). ‘Three days of Action, Art & Anarchy [sic] for queers of all sexualities,’ it read, announcing ‘the first ever London queercore gathering’ (AnarQuist, 1998a). This gathering, Queeruption, would feature ‘Bands; Performance; Parties; Film and video shows; Art exhibition; Radical sex; Workshops; Actions and lots more’ (AnarQuist, 1998a, side A). It would take place from the 25th to the 27th of September that year and be held at the by-then (in)famous squatted anarchist social centre, the 121 Centre. The 121 Centre was located at 121 Railton Road – the same ex-Sunlight Laundry building squatted by Olive Morris and Liz Obi in 1973, and subsequently occupied by Sabarr Books (see Chapter 6). Continuously occupied since a group of anarchists squatted it in 1981 (after Sabarr Books relocated to 378 Coldharbour Lane earlier that year), 121 Railton Road was by 1998 one of the longest-running squats in Britain (AnarQuist, 1998a; Longmore, 2004; Twaddle, 1981; Zee, 1999). As AnarQuist, the collective behind the gathering, put it in the flyer, the gathering was being organised because ‘We believe that there is more to being queer than what is offered to us at the moment, and want to create a radical alternative to the commercial, and a-political gay scene’ (AnarQuist, 1998a). Key to this project was a collective exploration of the relationship between queer and anarchist politics.

Piecing together a social, cultural and political geography of AnarQuist, the 121 Centre and Queeruption, this chapter argues that the members of AnarQuist were engaged in generating a localised queer theory – ways of queer thinking and knowing – with different emphases, priorities, texts, and lineages to those of queer theory as it is most commonly thought of and located. Grounded in the DIY culture of late 1990s England that coalesced in response to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (Howard, 1994), it drew not on Judith

QUEERUPTION

STRAIGHT OUTTA OLD COMPTON

Three days of
**Action, Art
& Anarchy**
for queers of
all sexualities

DIY/anticulture/SEX/pansexuality/politics/sounds/squat/freedom/action/subverting/anarchy/SM/punk/dreams/art/porn/sex-work/multimedia/saucy/experimental/glitter/writing/genderfuck/radical/drag/film/bands/performance/music/internet/party/magic/spoken word/open mike/food

25-27 September 1998
121 Centre, Brixton, London

Queeruption is the first ever London queercore gathering. We believe that there is more to being queer than what is offered to us at the moment, and want to create a radical alternative to the commercial, and a-political gay scene.

The festival is open to all, and is about us all taking initiative, creating and participating, instead of just consuming a lifestyle sold to us.

What to expect:
Bands; Performance; Parties; Film and video shows; Art exhibition; Radical sex; Workshops; Actions and lots more.

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE!

The welcome pack we are getting together will give more details about all the stuff happening, as well as a queercore guide to London. The main things you need to know are:
Accommodation: (if you need it) Will be in local squats. Bring a sleeping bag and a nice soft pillow. **Food:** A vegan cafe will be open for the entire weekend serving snacks + drinks. We will be cooking 2 meals a day and these will cost a minimal sum. (free if you help)

QUEERUPTION

it is still possible to contribute and get involved: film, video, zines, artwork, performance, workshops & anything queercore is welcome.

To submit artwork: (20/30/slides) get in touch on the following numbers or come to the centre for a hanging session on Monday, the 21 of September at 17:00

To show film or video: Send a VHS tape/8mm film to the address below, or phone to arrange delivery. **Queeruption hotline:** 0171-978 8214(ansaphone)/0956-268 988 or write to: **anarquist; 121 Railton Rd, Brixton; London SE21** or surf to: <http://www.saritm.dircon.co.uk/qcore.html>

Most queeruption events will be held at the 121 Centre. (the gigs on Fri/Sat nights are at Brady's, Atlantic Rd, Brixton.) The 121 building is partially wheelchair accessible, phone for details or to arrange access.

The easiest way to get to the 121 Centre is by tube to Brixton. On leaving the station, turn right onto Atlantic Rd. Follow this as it turns into Railton Rd. It takes about five minutes.



Figure 7-1: Queeruption flyer (side A) (AnarQuist, 1998a).

Friday 25	Saturday 26	Sunday 27
12:00 get together @ 121	12:00 Brunch drag up/dress down session	12:00 2:00 Brunch
2:00 Internet activism for cyber queers	2:00 Action for queer visibility meeting @ 121	3:00 Sex Workers Discussion: practical sex work for anarchists
3:00 Anarcho Sex Clubs	3:00 AIDS - Challenging orthodoxies	4:00 Pervi Picnic in Brockwell Park
4:00 Zines workshop	check for venue The art of Shoplifting practical workshop	4:00 Guitars For Girls with Debbie Smith
5:00 Pagan Ritual	6:00 Please Fuck Me Dinner and reading with Charlotte Cooper, Michael Atavar +others	6:00 Dinner and Closing Discussion: What is Queercore
6:00 Dinner and Open mike Session +Performances by: The Divine David Joelle Taylor	9:00 Gertrude/The Lesbian & Gay Community/Sapphic Sluts/Go Fish	8:00 acoustic stuff from Z/Christina Green/Ugly
9:00 Sexo-poetry and bizarre magic		
Mouthfull/Go Fish/Some Sonic/more		

all events are free

+parties at 121 Centre on Fri/Sat nights with radical sounds from Megabitch, Oilshore, Transgen, Gaya/Guillermo and others till very late.
 film and video show at the 121 basement throughout queeruption weekend.
 queercore art exhibition around the building during the week before and after

More stuff yet to be confirmed. all events in the programme are held at 121 Centre, 121 Railton Rd, Brixton, apart from the ones marked with a gray background which are at other locations/venues.

Figure 7-2: Queeruption flyer (side B) (AnarQuist, 1998a).

Butler but on Carol Queen, not on *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) but on *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* (Queen, 1998). '[S]cholars', as Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim have noted, 'do queer studies differently when they're faced with different institutional resources, student demographics, regional locations, and career goals' (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019, p. 21). Crucially, for all its trenchant and vital (self-)critiques, queer studies has long neglected to engage with its own development and workings in sites of knowledge production which not only reflect but actively reproduce class and racial stratification (Brim, 2020; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Based in a squatted south London anarchist social centre and developed with and through anarchist and pagan politics, the queer theorising of AnarQuist was a project committed to the redistribution and reworking of resources, as well as the valuing of intellectual work beyond (and against) the academy. The contexts in which AnarQuist, the 121 Centre and Queeruption came together, however – including, crucially, their location in Brixton – presented particular issues, dynamics, exclusions, tensions, histories and implications to work through.

In addition to developing the over-arching arguments of this thesis, this chapter contributes to both queer geographies and anarchist geographies by focusing on a site of queer anarchist knowledge production, and on an early queer anarchist collective at precisely the moment in which they began to explore the possibilities queer politics and identities presented for them. Further, it contributes to scholarship on queer festivals, which have been little studied in both literature on social movements and in queer studies (Eleftheriadis, 2015). This is striking, given that queer festivals are key sites in which 'queer' has been collectively formulated and negotiated, and that queer festivals have enriched and been enriched by a number of political projects and spaces (Eleftheriadis, 2015).

'Queer, anarchist and squatting geographies

Queer geographies are often conflated with lesbian and gay geographies, as well as with sexuality and space studies more broadly (Knopp, 2007). Work on queer geographies, however, has challenged the equation of queer spaces with gay and lesbian (or, less frequently, bisexual and/or trans) spaces (Oswin, 2008). More broadly, 'taken-for-granted categories and essentialisms' in geographies of sexuality and lesbian and gay geographies have been the focus of sustained critique (Knopp, 2007, p. 22). Such work has sought to highlight, in various ways, the hybridity and fluidity of sexual subjectivities, and to reimagine their geographical dimensions (Knopp, 2007).

‘Queer’ is a contested term with multiple and contradictory roots (Jagose, 1996; Knopp, 2007). Indeed, the political efficacy of queer – whether appended by ‘theory’ or not – arguably stems from its positioning as an ‘open mesh of possibilities’ (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8) and ‘necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation [and] permanent becoming’ (Jagose, 1996, pp. 129-131; Currier & Migraine-George, 2016; Eng, et al., 2005). Understandings of its spaces, origins, temporalities and movements, however, often fix it in very particular ways. ‘[W]e are used to thinking of queer theory,’ Petrus Liu argues, not only ‘as an exclusively Euro-American enterprise’ (Liu, 2015, p. 6) but also as a ‘distinct body of theoretical works produced in 1990s’ United States’ (Liu, 2015, p. 15), which is ‘to be found mainly in the universities’ (Plummer, 2005, p. 370). Indeed, queer theory is generally held to have emerged specifically at an academic conference in 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is often thought ‘to be found mainly in the universities’ (Browne & Nash, 2010; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Its driving political lineage is considered to be HIV/AIDS activism in 1980s North America – and sometimes, pointedly, ‘its own self-generated social movement of aspiring academics’ (Plummer, 2005, p. 370; Browne & Nash, 2010; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). As Liu asserts, however, that is but a ‘particular variant of queer theory’ – one that is ‘constantly expanded, revised, and displaced by competing sources of knowledge ... elsewhere’ (Liu, 2015, p. 31; Browne & Nash, 2010).¹ Indeed, queer can be said to have multiple pasts, including prior to its academic emergence in the 1990s (Amin, 2016). There are, as Kadji Amin suggests, ‘alternative historicities and imaginaries that swarm within and beside *queer*’ (Amin, 2016, p. 180, emphasis in original). That most well-known variant of queer theory – *queer* in its institutional form – has, importantly, been the focus of vital interventions which have engaged with how it has elided issues of race (Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

Anarchism, like queer, is a contested term, though it has come to be understood in somewhat set ways in relation to the academic discipline of geography, with which it has a long – if fractured – history. It is often traced back to the writings of Peter Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus and other influential anarchist thinkers in the late nineteenth century (Ferretti, et al., 2018; Springer, 2013; Springer, et al., 2012). The deaths of Kropotkin and Reclus in the early twentieth century are often seen to mark the start of a long intermission in this history – one that lasted until the 1970s, when anarchism was again given sustained consideration by

¹ Indeed, recent work has fruitfully explored how queer theory elaborated from and within a range of African contexts (without taking the designation ‘African’ for granted) can lead to ‘moments and points of friction, dissonance, tension, and disarticulation’ (Currier & Migraine-George, 2016, p. 289) which illuminate ‘queer theory’s Euro-American silent ethnocentrism[s] [...] secret normativities’ (Fiereck, et al., 2020, pp. 364-365) and ‘imperialist grounding ... in the US academy’ (Currier & Migraine-George, 2016, p. 283).

academic geographers, laying the groundwork for what has come to be known as ‘radical geography’ (Springer, et al., 2012, pp. 1-2). Recent years have seen a revitalisation of explicitly anarchist geographies (Clough & Blumberg, 2012; Ferretti, et al., 2018; Springer, et al., 2012). Work on anarchist geographies that engages with issues of race, gender and sexuality, however, remains rare. Further, while queer politics and anarchist politics have by no means been disconnected, ‘finding texts that draw out these relations can be a difficult task’ (Daring, et al., 2012, p. 5) – a task only recently made easier by the edited collections *Anarchism and Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power* (Heckert & Cleminson, 2011) and *Queering Anarchism: Essays on Gender, Power, and Desire* (Daring, et al., 2012). Contributions include explorations of how queer and anarchism – and, indeed, queer anarchism – might be brought to bear on BDSM and consent, sex work, the prison industrial complex, polyamory and on borders and policing, as well as on how anarchism might be rethought through queer-crip politics and transfeminism (Ben-Moshe, et al., 2012; Daring, 2012; Hexe, 2012; Lydon, 2012; Rogue, 2012; Song, 2012; Volcano, 2012). Gavin Brown’s overview (in *Anarchism and Sexuality*) of the creation of a range of queer autonomous spaces in the US and Europe (and the tensions within them) and Farhang Rouhani’s account (in *Queering Anarchism*) of the rise and demise of the Richmond Queer Space Project in Richmond, Virginia, are rare and valuable examples of engagements with queer anarchist projects, collectives and spaces, and the complexities involved in attempting to create and maintain them (Brown, 2011; Rouhani, 2012). Indeed, as Rouhani has noted, ‘while queer and anarchist theories offer inspiring, creative, utopic alternatives, they often do not get into the complex, contradictory, messy processes through which ideals are enacted’ (Rouhani, 2012, pp. 78-79).

Many such queer anarchist projects and processes have taken place in London – and particularly in London squats. Such projects have, however, received little critical attention. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, the ways in which squatting in England has intersected with, enabled and shaped queer politics and organising have been largely neglected. Important political lineages, struggles, spaces and histories have, thus, been overlooked. Building on and intervening in the literatures outlined above, this chapter charts how a rich, vibrant queer theory was actively developed by queer anarchists in the 1990s Brixton squatting scene, and explores the complex, contradictory and messy processes through which they were enacted in and through particular spaces.

In what follows, I begin by setting the context in which members of AnarQuist first began to come together – what some have termed the ‘DIY culture’ of late 1990s England (McKay, 1998, p. 2). I then chart the beginnings of AnarQuist proper, and the ways in which

its members theorised queer and sought to link queer and anarchist politics. Turning to Queeruption itself, I focus on the ways in which its organising mobilised particular understandings of queer – understandings which were at times in conflict with each other. Throughout, I attend to the spaces within which AnarQuist was formed and Queeruption organised, drawing out the ways in which these spaces enabled and shaped these projects in crucial ways. I do this by drawing on original semi-structured interviews and on archival material. I interviewed two members of AnarQuist and one Queeruption participant; one of these interviews was done face-to-face in 2017, one over Skype in 2018, and one over email in 2018. Another member of AnarQuist declined to be interviewed, but kindly pointed me to a wealth of material in the Mayday Rooms archive in central London and the 56a Infoshop archives in south London. I also drew on the personal papers of one of the AnarQuist members I interviewed, on material available in the online *urban75* archive, on print material produced by AnarQuist and on articles which appeared in local and national British press.

The beginnings of AnarQuist at the 121 Centre

The 1990s saw ‘an explosion’ of creative, autonomous political organising in Britain (Blunt & Wills, 2000, p. 28). Emblematic of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘DIY’ (Do It Yourself) culture of late 1990s England (and sometimes Britain more widely), it often pursued a non-hierarchical form of direct action organising to protect the environment, resist the arms industry, defend animal rights, oppose road-building, challenge land ownership, secure housing and also, importantly, to uphold ‘the right to party in peace’ (Blunt & Wills, 2000, p. 29; Eleftheriadis, 2015). Crucially, it often also sought to problematise distinctions between the organisers of political events and their participants (Eleftheriadis, 2015). Much of this organising was, at least initially, in response to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill (commonly referred to as ‘the CJB’) introduced on the 11th of January 1994, which became the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (commonly referred to as ‘the CJA’) of 1994 (Howard, 1994). Contained within the Act’s clauses were increased police stop and search powers, substantial changes to the traditional right to silence, and criminal sanctions against travellers, ravers, squatters, public assemblies and protests (Carey, 1998; Howard, 1994).²

² As noted in Chapter 2, Sections 72, 73 and 76 of the CJA pertained directly to squatters. Section 72 gave ‘displaced residential occupiers’ and ‘protected intended occupiers’ (as well as anyone proving to be acting on their behalf) the permission to use violence in order to enter into a squatted residential property (Howard, 1994). Section 73 made it an offence not to leave squatted residential premises when requested to by ‘displaced residential occupiers’, ‘protected intended occupiers’ or anyone proving to be acting on their behalf (rather than by ‘specified persons’, as stated in the Criminal Law Act of 1977) (Howard, 1994). Further, police would be able to arrest, without warrant, anyone they might *suspect* to be guilty of an offence under

The passing of the CJA had a significant unintended consequence: In effectively criminalising raving and protesting with the same definitions of ‘nuisance’ and ‘trespass’ (British Library, n.d.), it provoked a nationwide response and strengthened links between supposedly apolitical ‘ravers’³ and more traditionally political ‘protesters’ (Blunt & Wills, 2000; Mullin & Smith, 2014). The ‘DIY culture’ that coalesced as a result of this evidenced a strong anarchist ethos, although it must be noted that anarchism was not always *explicitly* invoked (Blunt & Wills, 2000; Eleftheriadis, 2015). George McKay suggests that ‘even if it [did not] overtly espouse it, DIY Culture practice[d] an intuitive liberal anarchism’ (McKay, 1998, pp. 3-4). There were also strong connections between the DIY culture of late 1990s England and paganism. As Alison Blunt and Jane Wills observed, many in the DIY scene were ‘very explicit about the politics of their lifestyle, using pagan ... language’ (Blunt & Wills, 2000, p. 29; Rietveld, 1998); similarly, Scott Hutson noted that ‘[r]eferences to shamanism and ... spiritual healing permeate raver discourse’ (Hutson, 1999, p. 54). Writing from within the DIY culture of late 1990s England, Alex Plows argued that for many direct activists ‘the value of nature and self can be described as a spirituality, literally an awareness of spirit, of life force’ (Plows, 1998, p. 168). Like Blunt and Wills, she referred to this as paganism – ‘but,’ she emphasised, this was a ‘practical paganism; first and foremost as an approach which has solid foundations in informing our attempts at radical change’ (Plows, 1998, p. 168).

It was in the context of this ‘DIY culture’ that some of the people who would go on to form AnarQuist first became politically active. As Kath (a pseudonym), a member of AnarQuist and one of the organisers of the original Queeruption told me, ‘Some of us were really involved in campaigning about [the CJB], when it came in, and after it came in, and trying to chart its progress’. It was also in this context that some of the people who would go on to form AnarQuist first began to make contact with each other. According to Vaz, another member of AnarQuist and organiser of Queeruption, ‘There was a lot of overlap between the Queeruption group and ... a samba band, Rhythms of Resistance’, for example. Involvement

section 73 (Howard, 1994). Those found guilty would be liable to 6 months’ imprisonment and/or a £5,000 fine (Howard, 1994; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Shelter Legal, 2018b). Section 76 introduced ‘interim possession orders’ a ‘quick remedy’ method of eviction: once an interim possession order was granted by a court (and provided that all the necessary legal procedures were correctly followed), squatters were required to leave the designated premises – whether residential or commercial – within 24 hours of its serving (Shelter Legal, 2018, n.p.). Interim possession orders cover anyone in the premises when an order is served, as well as anyone arriving at any time before the order expires (Howard, 1994). Failing to leave the premises or returning within one year are both criminal offences (Howard, 1994). Again, those found guilty would be liable to 6 months’ imprisonment and/or a £5,000 fine (Howard, 1994; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Shelter Legal, 2018b).

³ ‘Raves’ in this context can be broadly defined as often illegal, all-night (and sometimes all-day, as well) free parties featuring predominantly techno, trance, house, garage, jungle and gabba music, held in locations such as warehouses and open-air fields (Hutson, 1999; McKay, 1998; Mullin & Smith, 2014; Rietveld, 1998). Raves became increasingly important to British subcultures in the mid-to-late 1980s (Hutson, 1999; McKay, 1998; Mullin & Smith, 2014; Rietveld, 1998). In the 1990s, raves emerged into mainstream British youth cultures, becoming a licensed, multi-billion-dollar entertainment industry (Hutson, 1999; Mullin & Smith, 2014).

in a variety of such projects was common among those who would go on to organise Queeruption: ‘Most of us,’ Kath told me, ‘were involved in other stuff as well as just Queeruption – so I was really involved in Reclaim the Streets, Earth First!, and anti-car stuff and anti-road-building stuff, and all sorts of other campaigns’.

Squatting in Brixton

Squatting was key to all of this political activity, as it provided people with spaces and time in which to organise. During the period in which AnarQuist first began to come together, according to Kath, there ‘were loads of people with time on their hands. Because all these people were squatting, they weren’t struggling to pay rent ... No one did full-time jobs. ... People had all sorts of scams, and ways of living very frugally and very cheaply’. According to Kath, ‘[a]round that time there were ... literally hundreds of squats in Lambeth’, with several of these functioning as social centres. Kath was a squatter herself, and according to her, although the squatting scene in Lambeth was in many ways thriving, it was also under threat. ‘[Lambeth Council] were deliberately pursuing this policy of selling off all ... the “void” vacant street properties,’ she explained to me. According to her, however, what Lambeth Council ‘called “void” quite often were places they’d just abandoned and had been squatted for years, and were quite stable squats’. This abundance of squats meant that, in the 1990s, Brixton continued to be a hub of political activity; this concentration of squats and political activity, however, also appears to have fostered a certain insularity. ‘[M]ost of the people I spent time with lived ... around Brixton, and a little bit outside Brixton,’ Kath told me, ‘We knew some people in Streatham or some people in Stockwell or Vauxhall ... But that was really as far as anyone went, geographically’. As she put it, ‘there was stuff happening in Hackney, but that was at the other side of London. You just didn’t bother going there, ‘cause there was so much going on in Brixton’. Crucial to all of this activity and sense of community was the squatted 121 Centre. In addition to having hosted the groups mentioned in Chapter 6, by the 1990s the 121 Centre had also become a base of operations for Reclaim the Streets as well as groups organising against the poll tax and the CJA (Longmore, 2004; Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1989; urban75, n.d. b; Zee, 1999). ‘[T]he 121 Centre was really busy,’ Kath recalled. According to her, ‘a lot of people ... would come to 121 and we’d all eat together and be, like, thirty, forty, fifty people all eating dinner, pretty much every night. ... It’s a really strong thing for a community to have’.

'The q-word'

Shortly after moving to London in 1992, aged 17, Kath became 'part of ... a very, very small group ... who met up [and] realised we were all teenagers'. Most of the members of the group, according to Kath, were still at school – she herself had 'just left school'. The group called themselves Queer Kids. They began to collectively consider and formulate what queerness meant to them. These discussions began at a time when, according to Kath, 'it was a challenge [for many people] to use this word, "queer," about themselves, because up until then they'd been proud to be gay, or proud to be lesbian, and that had been a big part of their identity'. Kath had herself first come out as bisexual. 'At that time,' she told me, 'there was a lot of segregation ... between the people that call themselves the bisexual community in the UK ... and people who identify as queer'. According to her, this was due to 'some of the people who identify as bisexual [not having] been able to accept the idea of "the q-word" about themselves'. This was (and is) in part, according to her, 'because they didn't realise that queer wasn't just this catch-all term'; they didn't realise, she contended, that it 'meant something in itself'. 'Queer', for her, was 'about questioning the gender binary system, and queer was about being radical in some way, and being critical of the capitalist patriarchal world we live in and having somewhat of a political bent'. Kath's account implies an understanding of at least some bisexual identification as being grounded on a misunderstanding of 'queer', which, if overcome, would likely lead to an 'acceptance' of the 'q-word' by bisexuals. As seen in Chapter 5, this echoes a long history of claims that bisexuality is a confused version of other sexual and political identities (Hemmings, 2002). A related temporal dynamic can be perceived in Kath's claim that '[a]t that point, there were men and women. There weren't genderqueer people going around – or very, very few of them'. Until 'queer' came along, she explained, 'it was a very different world'. Her framing of 'queer' as marking the dawn of a radically different new world of gender-troubling and fluidity reinscribes prevalent teleological narratives of sexual and gendered liberation which place queerness as an evolution over presumably outmoded terms, politics and identifications – and which overlook the sheer heterogeneity that the terms 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'bisexual' gesture to, historically and in the present (Banerjea, et al., 2019; Jagose, 1996; Walter, 2018 [1980]).⁴

⁴ Indeed, Kath's characterising of queer as 'about questioning the gender binary system, and ... about being radical in some way, and being critical of the capitalist patriarchal world we live in and having somewhat of a political bent' could also apply to the Gay Liberation Front politics espoused and negotiated by the members of the Brixton Gay Community and the Brixton Black Women's Group.

These discussions took place – and developed – over several years. Eventually, according to Kath, as she met other anarchists who used or were intrigued by ‘the q-word’, they ‘kind of came together and realised we wanted to do something about being anarchist and about being queer’. A ‘small group of us who were choosing to use this word, “queer”’ began to gather at the 121 Centre, to ‘try and figure out what that meant to us, and what we had in common’. This was an occasionally thorny process, which required a lot of negotiating. ‘Sometimes’, according to Kath, ‘it was quite hard sort of keeping the group together, because the group that sort of coalesced around 121 was very diverse in terms of people’s backgrounds and [was] very multigenerational’. A key sticking point, as she explained, was the difficulty that ‘some of the old Greenham women’ in the group had with the kinds of organising that queer was seen to imply, even as they were actively taking part in explorations and formulations of queer politics. In outlining these conflicts, Kath again mobilised narratives that could be seen as fixing certain politics to specific spaces and times, as distinct from the queer present. ‘All the women who were interested in [“queer”], who were from this older, Greenham sort of generation’, Kath explained, ‘came from being quite separatist, so for them, even working with men was quite a big challenge’.⁵

Finding commonalities and negotiating their differences, the group, over time, started to call themselves AnarQuist – an amalgam of ‘anarchist’ and ‘queer’. Although many in this group had initially met through being involved in the kinds of DIY organising outlined above, it was in the 121 Centre that they came together and became a collective of anarchist queers. ‘Where to start...?’, reads a piece in *queerewind*, a zine charting the history of Queeruption up until 2002. ‘Well,’ it continues, ‘we could say it all kicked off when AnarQuist started up in 1997 down at the 121 centre [sic] ...’ (Queeruption, 2003).

‘anarchoqueer, but what does that mean anyway?’

In a piece titled ‘What the Hell is Anarquist Anyway? (an attempt)’ in AnarQuist’s first zine, *ANARQUIST #1*, a member of the collective explains that ‘Sometimes people wonder or ask “What does Anarquist do?”’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 22). The response to this question, according to the member, usually was “‘Well we sorta have parties and hang out with our

⁵ This is a reference to the long-running Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, which was established in 1981 in protest against nuclear weapons being held at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire, England, and which went on to become internationally famous as a moment, mode and space of UK feminism. See Sasha Roseneil’s *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham* (2000) for a troubling of the ways in which the politics of Greenham and ‘Greenham women’ themselves are usually figured. See also the piece ‘Who feels it knows it: Rethinking the peace movement’ by BBWG member Gail Lewis (1988).

friends” (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 22). This, however, was only part of what the group did. The group initially focused on the discussions outlined above, as well as on throwing parties and organising demonstrations. What is described as their ‘first action’ took place during the 1997 Pride march in London and involved a three-metre high phoenix puppet intended to represent ‘the spirit of queerness rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of the rainbow flag’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 2; Queeruption, 2003). Later, as a way of actively and collectively exploring the connections between anarchism and queerness, the members of AnarQuist began working on a zine – which eventually became *ANARQUIST #1* (AnarQuist, 1998b). In its pages, their initial excitement around the political possibilities of ‘the q-word’ gives way to frustration at how queer was deployed in ways which, for them, neutralised its political and critical force: ‘queer = political,’ reads an untitled piece in *ANARQUIST #1*, declaring, ‘ok so that’s what its history as a reclaimed word has taught us’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). ‘[B]ut,’ the piece continues, ‘what now?’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). The ‘now’ of queer, the piece argued, was ‘queer = consume = lifestyle’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). ‘[O]h dear!’ it asks, ‘what the fuck happened?’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). ‘[F]or me,’ the piece continues, ‘queer means less and less unless you maybe prefix it with erm, say – anarcho!’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). For the author of the piece, what this prefix might change is not a given: ‘anarchoqueer, but what does that mean anyway?’ they ask (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). Various pieces in *ANARQUIST #1* dwell on affinities between queer and anarchist politics – although, significantly, the ways in which they might come together are not seen as self-evident: ‘[B]eing an anarchist’, as one author phrased it, ‘dont [sic] mean ya not gonna accept fucked up definitions of male and female roles’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4).

In order to collectively explore these affinities further, AnarQuist began to host a reading group at the 121 Centre. ‘We kind of became aware that queer theory was churning up and that people were reading Judith Butler at some point,’ Kath explained, ‘but I don’t remember us ever spending a lot of time discussing it’. As a group, they were wary of institutionalised queer theory, seeing it as having little relevance to their broader political commitments, as embedded in exclusionary class and racial dynamics reproduced in and by higher education and – crucially – as unsexy (‘It just turns me off,’ as Kath put it). Instead, Kath noted, they read ‘Carol Queen’s porn stories ... She put them all together in a book that’s, like, one big, long story. It’s called *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*. It’s an amazing book’ (Queen, 1998). Although the members of AnarQuist would likely have avoided the term due to their distrust of academia, their collective explorations of queer – elaborated in the context of late-90s UK DIY culture, anti-CJA organising, squatting, anarchist politics and paganism –

must be recognised as one strand of the ‘transnational and transcultural practice’ of queer theorising (Liu, 2015, p. 15). To return to the epigraph which opened this chapter, theirs was self-consciously *not* the kind of theorising dismissed by Jack Prosper, the titular leather daddy of *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*; rather, it could be characterised as collective theorising in and of the sack (and a sack in a squat, at that). This is not to say that it was by any means insular, self-contained, or developed without reference to US academic queer theory (or that it was unambiguously successful in its aims). Rather, it is an opening to explore its specific connections, contexts, dynamics and tensions, as well as the spatial processes through which they were developed and enacted.⁶

Paganism, anarchism and environmental activism

Reflecting the prevalence of paganism in the DIY culture of late 1990s England, some members of AnarQuist were also active in pagan circles. Indeed, paganism was one node through which they made connections between queer and anarchist politics. Some in AnarQuist saw a kinship between ‘witches [,] heretics [and] queers’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 25). In this vein, *ANARQUIST #1* features an extract from Arthur Evans’ *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (2013 [1978]), which ties non-procreative and non-heterosexual practices to paganism; argues that ‘Christianity[,] obsessed with obedience to established institutions,’ sought to exterminate witches and their ‘anarchistic values’ (Evans, 2013 [1978], p. 105); and calls for the organising of ‘autonomous anarchist collectives’ (Evans, 2013 [1978], p. 174) where ‘Gay culture can flourish free from repression and exploitation’ (Evans, 2013 [1978], p. 177). Further, by Kath’s recollection, there were from very early on ‘people from Queer Pagan Camp totally involved in the first Queeruption’. What drew Vaz and others in AnarQuist to Queer Pagan Camp, according to him, was ‘the statement that they had around not just paganism, but also activism, and Earth activism. And for us, that really called to us’. A key reason Queer Pagan Camp appealed to Vaz, he explained, was their reworking of traditional ‘magical practices ... based on this binary [of] male/female, god/goddess’. Whereas in traditional pagan circles, Vaz argued, an adherence to sexual and gendered binaries meant that ‘lesbian and gay [people] were ostracised’, Queer Pagan Camp, he argued, was ‘breaking down the idea of god and goddess’ and ‘saying, “Well, let’s mix it all up!” ... “Let’s pull things

⁶ With regard to the connections, contexts, dynamics, tensions and demarcations between queer, anarchism and academia raised in this chapter, it is worth noting that, in recent years, Butler has engaged with and drawn on anarchist thought, and identified resonances and affinities between the challenges that queer and anarchist organising pose to identity, settler colonialism, capitalism and the nation-state (Butler & Heckert, 2011; Butler, 2013; Butler, 2015).

apart. Let's try things anew". This reworking of pagan traditions, Vaz felt, was 'speaking in the same space as [AnarQuist]'.⁷

Being grounded in the DIY culture of late 1990s England, drawing on British pagan traditions and being based in Brixton meant that AnarQuist – and its formulations of queer – had particular issues to address and work through. These included the implications of DIY culture's and paganism's celebrations of rurality and rejection of 'progress culture' (Plows, 1998, p. 159). 'One of the problems with, say, attacking progress,' McKay argues, 'is that one of the alternatives on offer is nostalgia, and nostalgia in the British countryside is a black-free zone' (McKay, 1998, p. 33). Much like the 'Rule Britannia,' Britpop-infused popular culture of the time, DIY Culture (and, we might add, paganism) implicitly and often explicitly 'bleache[d] away all traces of black influences ... in a mythical imagined past of olde England as it never was' (Huq, 1996, p. 79). 'Celebrating the land,' as McKay notes 'has its uncomfortable antecedents' (McKay, 1998, p. 41). Indeed, as Caroline Bressey reminds us, 'the relationship between whiteness and national identity in the symbolism of rurality continues to be used ... to justify racist imaginaries of England (and Britain)' (Bressey, 2009, p. 390).⁸

As has long been observed, ecological ideas can be deployed to support deeply reactionary politics – including outright ecofascism (Kafer, 2013; Lewis, 2017; McKay, 1998; Morris, 2017; Out of the Woods, 2014). In the context of environmental activism in 1990s Britain, McKay noted that among the 'alliances we've seen' were 'the neo-fascist and the anarchist doing animal liberation work together' (McKay, 1998, p. 46). Given these long-standing dynamics, any appeal to confluences of anarchism, paganism and environmental activism *must* attend to the deeply racist, ableist and genocidal implications of the ways in which these have come together in anarcho-primitivism (or anti-civilisational anarchism) and certain formulations of 'green anarchism' (Morris, 2017; Parson, 2018; Plows, 1998; Price, 2019). Often influenced by the writings of eco-primitivists such as John Zerzan (1988) and 'deep ecologists' such as Arne Naess (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1989) and Bill Devall and George Sessions (Devall & Sessions, 1985), anarcho-primitivism and certain formulations of 'green

⁷ With regard to narratives of 'queer' in relation to other terms, identities and politics, it must be noted, however, that a reworking of sex and gender binaries in pagan traditions is not an exclusively queer innovation. In such reworkings, queer paganism drew on a long tradition of gay and lesbian paganism. 'Lesbians had been associated with paganism and witchcraft for a long time – almost to the point of it being a cliché', as Queeruption participant Jay pointed out. 'I respected that', she added, 'but' – still – 'it was very exciting to hear about the creation of the Queer Pagan camps' with their explicitly queer commitments and grounding in late-1990s British DIY politics and culture.

⁸ This is in spite of the fact that, as Bressey notes, Black histories of England are intimately connected to the rural too: '[T]he traditional English cottage garden (transported across the Anglo imperial world)', she argues, echoing Judy Ling Wong's phrasing, 'is made up of little more than "a collection of glorified foreign weeds"' (Bressey, 2009, p. 389; Wong, 1999). Further, countless unnamed Black servants and enslaved men, women and children, she notes, lived and worked on country estates (Bressey, 2009). Thus, contemporary sites of rurality cannot be disconnected from their histories of empire and trade, whether in herbs, spices or humans (Bressey, 2009).

anarchism' hold that 'civilisation' itself is the root of human subjugation and environmental destruction, and that small hunter-gatherer community formations are an ideal to aspire and return to (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Evans, 2013 [1978]; Parson, 2018; Price, 2019).⁹ Such views are almost invariably accompanied by calls to substantially decrease the human population, in the name of ecological salvation (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Devall & Foreman, 1986; Price, 2019). Arguments for and practices of population control cannot be disentangled from histories of eugenics, colonialism and white supremacy (Bryan, et al., 1985; Cleminson, 2019; Hemmings, 2018; Kafer, 2013; Lewis, 2017);¹⁰ in the context of deep ecology (and the philosophies it went on to influence), Brian Tokar observed in 1988 that '[j]ust how to decrease population is rarely discussed – we are just assured that it will be “gradual” and “by attrition”’ (Tokar, 1988, p. 35). '[T]his omission', he argued, 'creates openings for all manner of naïve, dangerous and even openly racist proposals' (Tokar, 1988, p. 35). Indeed, proposed deep ecologist solutions to the so-called 'overpopulation problem' included accepting HIV/AIDS as a means of controlling human population numbers, as well as 'just let[ting] nature seek its own balance' with regard to the 1986 famine in Ethiopia and 'to let the people there just starve' (Devall & Foreman, 1986, p. 43; Morris, 2017; Price, 2019; Tokar, 1988).¹¹

In terms of AnarQuist and the 121 Centre, this wider context and a reluctance or refusal to engage with these histories and implications might be one of the reasons why, according to Vaz, despite explicit anti-fascist politics and being 'in a really Black part of London, [the 121 Centre] was a white folk place'. 'It was a constant conversation,' as he told me. 'You know ... “Why is this so white?”'. The context, tensions and lineages outlined here were not – in interviews or in writing – registered by members of AnarQuist as possible answers to this question. These are, however, possible entry points into understanding why the queer ways of knowing developed by AnarQuist in the 121 Centre were, much like their most famous US

⁹ Of course, the very concepts of 'civilisation' and 'technology' are, after all, very difficult to define and are thus a central point of debate amongst anarcho-primitivists, green anarchists, etc. (Parson, 2018).

¹⁰ On this point, I take the reader back to Chapter 6 and the critique, by members of the Brixton Black Women's Group and OWAAD, of the ways in which 'the Women's Liberation Movement took up the issue of "Abortion on Demand" in the 1970s (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 105). 'Black women', they wrote, 'had to point out that we have always been given abortions more readily than white women and are indeed often encouraged to have terminations we didn't ask for. It's for this reason, too, that when the women's movement demanded "free, safe, and available contraception for all women", we had to remind them that for Black women this often means being used as guinea-pigs in mass birth control programmes, or as objects of "research" when new forms of birth control need to be tested. And when the same women talked about "A Woman's Right to Choose", we responded that for Black women, this must also mean having the right to choose to *have* our children, planned or unplanned' (Bryan, et al., 1985, p. 105).

¹¹ In light of the widespread persistence of calls for population controls as a self-evident solution to environmental and social injustices, it is worth emphasising that 'the question of population control' serves to obfuscate what is not so much a crisis of overpopulation as much as a crisis of exploitation and the distribution of resources – and that in doing so it provides cover for capitalism, imperialism and racism (Bookchin, 1996 [1990]; Tokar, 1988). See also Sophie Lewis' (2017) discussion of calls for population control in Donna Haraway's recent work.

counterpart, a conspicuously white project, albeit due to very different spatial and political dynamics than those of institutionalised US queer theorising (Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

'It's no longer a place for grumpy, straight men!'

Wanting to explore doing something other than organising the occasional demonstration, hosting parties, making zines and 'hanging out with friends', members of AnarQuist began to discuss the organising of a bigger event. Some members were also frustrated with the London 'perky/sm/fetish scene' (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). '[W]hy is it sooo white, male and wait for it ... middle (or even upper) class?' asked a piece in *ANARQUIST #1* (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). '[W]hat we need to do,' the piece concluded, 'is create our own space and terrorize those pseudo-perky capitalists...' (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 4). Once again, it was in the 121 Centre that AnarQuist created that space. This time, this process entailed materially transforming the 121 Centre. '[The] ground floor space originally hadn't been very useful,' Kath told me, 'and at one point in '97/'98 people mostly involved in the AnarQuist group decided, "Let's clear it out, and let's repaint it all, and let's jazz it up and make it all a bit more glamorous"'. It was then, she explained, that 'all this colourful paint went on the walls, and some really nice murals'. '[W]ithin the 121 Centre,' Vaz recalls, '...some people thought that "Oh god, the bloody queers are taking it over! And it's no longer a place for grumpy straight men!"'. Inspired by this process of spatial assertiveness and transformation, '[w]e decided', as Kath told me, "'Let's put on an event together. Let's do a weekend-long event together"'. Plans soon began to take shape. 'There were people who were interested in music, and people who were interested in food, and people who were interested in workshops – lots and lots of different things,' explained Vaz. The very possibility of Queeruption, then, was only conceived by the members of AnarQuist *because* they had use of the 121 Centre and felt able to assert themselves and transform it. Crucially, as a squatted social centre, it allowed them to organise the festival for very little money and to make it free, in line with their politics.

ANARQUIST #1 came out in June 1998, announcing, 'one project that we're really *Into [sic] is a queerfest for september here in london [sic]' (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 2). The emphasis was on collaboration and experimentation: 'this could go anywhere', the announcement continued, 'and it's going to involve shit loads of work ... if your [sic] into getting involved then get in touch now!' (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 2). This approach was certainly due to the group's anti-hierarchical ethos, but it was also due to very practical concerns around capacity and scale. According to Kath, the group behind this announcement was very small.

‘There was really, like, five or six of us who were involved,’ she explained. ‘It wasn’t a big group of people.’ The name of the event hadn’t even been set at that point – as Kath, recalls, ‘it was only really a month or two beforehand that we came up with this great name, ‘Queeruption’. ‘Cause the idea was, like, kind of “eruption of queerness,” or – there was lots of different ways you could sort of play with the words’. Still, the announcement in *ANARQUIST #1* marked a turning point, and AnarQuist ‘started to go into overdrive with plans for Queeruption!’ (Queeruption, 2003).

Definitions, coalitional possibilities and infrastructure

In preparation, ‘the AnarQuist crew,’ as Kath recalled, ‘started making friends with different people around London’. They began to advertise their plans widely. ‘I think I saw a piece [about it] in *The V Files*’, Jay, a Queeruption participant, told me. Upon seeing it, she ‘jumped at the chance to get involved’. ‘I enjoyed going on the Pride march’, she explained, ‘but the party afterwards was clearly aimed at fairly conservative gay people. There was nothing for us outsiders, so clearly we had to create something ourselves’. Crucially, the fact that the festival would be held at the 121 Centre was a significant draw for her. As she put it, by that time the 121 Centre ‘was a long-time, legendary squatted venue’ – and one to which she had still never been. ‘I thought it was about time I went there anyway, so this was the perfect opportunity’, she reasoned.

For Vaz, this establishing of new ties was based on a self-consciously capacious understanding of queer that was not exclusive to non-heterosexual identities or sexual practices. ‘During Queeruption’, as he put it, ‘we just connected with anybody. You know? ... We don’t care what you get up to in bed. ... If queer resonates with you, you’re queer. Come and join us!’. Along these lines, a piece in *ANARQUIST #1* dwelled on the imperative to create ‘a community ... that includes all different kinds of people Not just homos, punks and ravers’ – because, it argued, ‘we’re all pretty much wierdos [sic], and probably all queer (regardless of sexual orientation) once we strip away society’s coating’ (AnarQuist, 1998b, p. 22). This understanding of queer had unexpected infrastructural implications. Such a capacious understanding of queer, according to Vaz, meant that ‘we had a lot of people who really, really connected to us ... and then they helped with things like sound systems and transport’. They also helped with catering and accommodation for those attending. ‘[A] lot of people in the squatting scene,’ Kath explained, ‘helped out by going to New Covent Garden Market and bringing the [food they skipped] to 121’. Others squatted ‘buildings so that people that were

turning up from out of town could have places to stay’. Among these was ‘an old library building ... that had been shut down on Jeffreys Road’. That building, according to Kath, was ‘squatted partly as accommodation for Queeruption attendees, and that turned into quite a long-running queer squat, for about a year after that’.¹² In a notable instance of a Queeruption event happening outside the 121 Centre, agreements were made for Queeruption-hosted bands to play at the nearby Brady’s Bar on the festival’s opening night (Figure 7-3) (AnarQuist, 1998a). The 121 Centre, for all the possibilities it opened up, did not lend itself to a multi-band festival gig night, considered essential by AnarQuist’s music enthusiasts. Brady’s Bar, located at 20 Atlantic Road (formerly the site of Brixton’s Railway Hotel), regularly hosted punk gigs, had a ‘well-known “jazz” approach to the licensing laws’ and was already frequented by many in the Brixton squat scene (urban75, 2011, n.p.).¹³

This coming together and collective work, however, also brought tensions around different people’s definitions of queer – and the implications of these – to a head. David Bell and Gill Valentine argue that ‘perhaps the most significant, and for many the most seductive aspect of the appearance of queer, was its much-flaunted inclusiveness’ (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 19). Queer, they argue, ‘embraced literally anyone who refused to play by the rules of heteropatriarchy’ – or, at least, that was the intention and stated position of many who used the term (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 19). For some in AnarQuist and the Queeruption organising collective – as for some academic theorists – ‘queer’ was understood as encompassing *non-normative* gendered and sexualised practices and identities *of all kinds*, even putatively heterosexual ones (Browne & Nash, 2010; Cohen, 1997; Eichhorn, 2013; Nash, 2010).¹⁴ This view, however, was not shared by all in AnarQuist and the Queeruption organising collective.

¹² Six photographs of the building, Jeffreys Library, taken between the early 1960s and the late 1980s/early 1990s – while it was still in use as a library – can be viewed at Lambeth Archives’ online image collection, at boroughphotos.org/lambeth/search-results/?fAreas=&fThemes=&fYear=&fPeople=&fCollection=&fTypeOfImage=&fRefNum=&fSearcherTitle=jeffreys+library&fSearcherDesc= (Lambeth Archives, 2020). The library, which opened on 23rd April 1960, was demolished in 2000 and replaced with a block of flats – Barrington Court at 29 Jeffreys Road, Stockwell, London SW4 6QU (Sydney Newbery / Lambeth Archives, c.1975 [2020]).

¹³ After Brady’s closed down in 1999, 20 Atlantic Road was itself squatted. Between 2000 and 2002, a crew of squatters ran a bar and an art, music and poetry venue there (urban75, 2011). The ground floor of the building is now occupied by a Wahaca chain restaurant (Wahaca, n.d.).

¹⁴ On this and many other points, we would do well to keep Cathy Cohen’s seminal 1997 piece ‘Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: The radical potential of queer politics?’ in mind. Cohen notes that instead of destabilising binaries and categories of gender and sexuality, some formulations of queer politics have been built around a simple binary between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual; a binary in which all heterosexuals are dominant and all queers are marginalised. Such a binary necessitates an elision of, for example, racism and classism; the varying degrees and multiple sites of power within all categories of sexuality, including heterosexuality, are thus ignored. ‘How’, Cohen asks, ‘would queer activists understand politically the lives of women—in particular women of color—on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support? Further, how do queer activists understand and relate politically to those whose same-sex sexual identities position them within the category of queer, but who hold other identities based on class, race and/or gender categories which provide them with membership in and the resources of dominant institutions and groups?’ (Cohen, 1997, p. 442). The radical potential of queerness lies, Cohen suggests, in the opportunities it provides to bring together all those deemed marginal, through an intersectional analysis that recognises how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate people’s lives.



Figure 7-3: The proximity of Brady's Bar and Brockwell Park to the 121 Centre enabled Queeruption's organisers to host events there.

Many of the people who 'were really supportive and were fundamental to Queeruption happening,' according to Vaz, 'didn't identify as lesbian or gay, or bisexual, or transgender, or any of those things'. They were, as he put it, 'ostensibly heterosexual in bed'. This became a point of contention for some in AnarQuist and the Queeruption organising collective. 'There was, uh, certain persons who will remain nameless,' according to Vaz, 'who said that the – like, some of the people ... they weren't *really* queer'. As Vaz recalled, 'Once the people who

had been our allies heard other people who were part of Queeruption were saying they weren't queer, then they ... just weren't available so much anymore ... I mean, why would they?'. In the absence of accounts from these 'persons who will remain nameless,' we can only speculate as to what the nuances of their critiques were. For Vaz, what was at stake were issues of hierarchy, solidarity, self-definition and exclusion. 'Like, where does this scale of queerness come from?' he asked me during our interview, adding, 'I mean, really, it's just preposterous'. These contestations over the meanings and boundaries of queerness had lasting consequences. 'It's sad,' Vaz reflected, 'because it ... broke up some friendships'.¹⁵

Queeruption

As these conflicts took place, by the time Queeruption began, the organisers 'were really blown away by the numbers who arrived,' Kath recalled. This was surprising to her given that, as she put it, 'The programme's not got that much on it, really'. The festival's programme (Figure 7-2) reflected the interests, skills and experiences of members of AnarQuist and the Queeruption organizing collective. It included events such as workshops on 'internet activism for cyber queers,' zine-making and 'the art of shoplifting,' as well as a 'pagan ritual,' a 'Pervi Picnic' held in nearby Brockwell Park (Figure 7-3), and a sex workers' discussion on 'practical sex work for anarchists' (AnarQuist, 1998a, side B). Crucially, the number and types of events were determined in large part by the space the organisers were working with. 'I mean, [121 Railton Road] was a really small building,' Kath noted. 'It's basically just [an] end-of-terrace house'. Given the size of the space, only one event could be held in the 121 Centre at a time, and only so many events could be held over the course of the weekend. Thus, although the 121 Centre made Queeruption possible, it also constrained the festival in key ways. The coming together of the two, crucially, undermined some of AnarQuist's political commitments. According to Kath, questions of disability and access were very important to the group and had to be constantly negotiated by some of its members. 'There were disabled people who were part of our group', she told me, including one who 'had a special adaptive vehicle'. The combination of Queeruption's unexpected success and the space of the 121 Centre, however, worked against the organisers' aim to make the festival as accessible as possible. While they had noted in the festival programme that '[t]he 121 building is partially wheelchair accessible' (AnarQuist, 1998a, side A), the sheer number of people in such a small space and the

¹⁵ Here, I remind the reader of the similarly affectively charged definitional, political and territorial conflicts which took place in the Brixton Gay Community (see Chapter 5).



Figure 7-4: The information desk/zine table by the entrance to the 121 Centre, while Queeruption was taking place. Notice the copies of ANARQUIST #1 (on the right; red and black, with the number 1 on them) (sered, 2005).



Figure 7-5: The main ground floor space of the 121 Centre, while Queeruption was taking place. Usually, this was where the bookshop/library and squatters' advice desk were located (sered, 2005).

manoeuvres required to navigate it made it impossible to access for someone in a wheelchair or with limited mobility more broadly. '[W]hen Queeruption was happening...' recalled Kath, 'the entire ground floor was, like, full of people. You couldn't force your way through the crowd'. For those able to access and navigate the building, 'to get to the upstairs the easiest thing was actually to go out, around the pavement, in the side door, and sort of fight your way up the staircase'. Although the combination of the small space and large numbers of people led to overcrowding, for those able to take part in the festival it could also foster a certain intimacy.

As noted above, a key part of AnarQuist's claiming of space in the 121 Centre was to transform it both materially and affectively – to 'make it 'a bit more glamorous' and 'no longer a place for grumpy straight men'. It was this process of spatial assertiveness and transformation that sowed the seeds for Queeruption. Photographs of the event – posted in late July 2005 by one of the organisers of Queeruption to a publicly-viewable album on the photo-sharing site Flickr (sered, 2005) – provide glimpses into the processes through which AnarQuist transformed the 121 Centre, and how the 121 Centre shaped Queeruption. These photographs attest to the labour that went into the material transformation of the space and the creation of the atmosphere of the festival; I deploy them here as a way of grounding the geographies discussed in this chapter (Figures Figure 7-4 through Figure 7-9). A zine table by the door functioned as an orientation point on arrival (Figure 7-4). The colour palette and textures used in the main ground floor area of the 121 Centre – yellow paint on the walls; peach, pink and royal purple fabrics layered over the ceiling and decorated with gold stars; striking reds and oranges in art hung on the walls – evokes a sense of warmth and softness in the photos (Figure 7-5). The photos of various signs spelling out words such as 'ass', 'lick', 'cunt', 'clamp', 'sex', 'top', 'finger' and 'pump' arranged on a wall, meanwhile, were a clear statement that Queeruption was intended to be a space for sexual exploration (Figure 7-6).¹⁶ The smallness of the 121 Centre is also fully on display in the photographs. A small stage doubled as a rather crowded seating area when performances were not taking place (Figure 7-7). When performances were taking place, most people can be seen seating on the floor, and those moving around the space seem to have had no choice but to walk over those sitting (Figure 7-8). Entirely painted in anarchist red-and-black and decorated with a large 'AnarQuist' banner, the basement gives the impression of being a four-dimensional political manifesto (Figure 7-9).

¹⁶ The 'general horniness' (Brown, 2007, p. 2695) that is a central organising principle of many queer spaces is not without its critics. As Brown has noted 'there is a tendency within [queer] networks to associate what it means to be a "radical queer" with a very specific brand of sex radicalism' – often involving public sex, BDSM and polyamory (Brown, 2007, p. 2695). See also the section on the 'Can't Fuck, Won't Fuck' event in Chapter 8.



Figure 7-6: The main ground floor space of the 121 Centre, while Queeruption was taking place, looking towards the front windows (sered, 2005).



Figure 7-7: The 121 Centre was located in a small semi-detached shop-front house, and so space was tight. While Queeruption was taking place, the seating area by the front windows doubled as a stage for performances (sered, 2005).



Figure 7-8: A Queeruption event in full swing (sered, 2005).



Figure 7-9: Participants in the 'Guitar for Girls' workshop which took place in the 121 Centre's basement (sered, 2005).

According to Kath, Vaz and Jay, Queeruption was a success. For Vaz, ‘Queeruption was a pivotal point in terms of people shifting and playing with the idea of what queer means’. The event – shaped and made possible by the squatted 121 Centre – was, he argues, ‘a physical manifestation of years of ... that conversation, that shifting’. Soon, however, the members of AnarQuist would have another, very pressing project to focus on. As Kath explained, ‘That was the year that 121 Centre got its court papers and started the whole legal battle’.

Conclusion

In a move that many attribute to the punitive atmosphere created by the Criminal Justice Act of 1994, on Thursday the 14th of January 1999 Lambeth Council’s claim for possession of 121 Railton Road was upheld in court, and an eviction order was issued (urban75, n.d. b; Zee, 1999). A small collective of squatters came together to ensure the building was occupied full-time, as part of wider efforts by the squatter scene in Brixton and beyond to save the 121 Centre (urban75, 1999; urban75, n.d. b). According to Vaz, ‘[a] lot of people who were involved with Queeruption tried to stop the eviction’. ‘We were still around’, he added. ‘We didn’t disappear’. As Kath recalls, ‘[W]e started doing eviction defence, and barricading, and occupying ... We all got caught up in that, obviously. Most of the squatting scene around Brixton did’. The efforts to save the 121 Centre included building a website, modifying billboards, and briefly occupying the office of Lambeth Council leader Jim Dickson on Monday the 8th of February 1999 (urban75, 1999; urban75, n.d. b; Chambers, 1999).

On Saturday the 10th of April 1999, the Centre’s occupiers held a street party directly outside the building to celebrate 86 days of resistance (Figure 7-10) (urban75, n.d. b; Tom, 1999). The road was barricaded and sound systems were brought out (urban75, n.d. b; Tom, 1999). According to ‘Tom’ – one of the 121 occupiers – ‘There was some strange echoes and recontextualising of Railton Road’s history here ... The space had been reclaimed’ (Tom, 1999, n.p.). This ‘reclamation,’ however, could do with being qualified. The space had been reclaimed, but by whom, and for whom? ‘The locals looked on with a mix of curiosity and indifference,’ ‘Tom’ wrote of the event, conceding that, ‘[a]ll are welcome but you know that the audience is white/euro anarchists’ (Tom, 1999, n.p.). Given the history of Brixton and 121 Railton Road, this ‘recontextualising’ could certainly be called ‘strange’ – although in the context of the conversations around the persistent whiteness of the community around the 121 Centre that Vaz alluded to, perhaps it would also be unsurprising.



Figure 7-10: Street party held in and outside the 121 Centre on Saturday the 10th of April 1999, to celebrate 86 days of resisting eviction by Lambeth Council (Hoffman, 1999).

Lambeth Council, in the meantime, was determined to drown out all echoes of Railton Road’s radical histories. On Thursday 12 August 1999, shortly after 6:30am, six bailiffs entered the 121 Centre, with over 150 specialist armed police officers standing by (Chambers, 1999). They vacated the building in minutes, 18 years and 6 months after the 121 Centre opened and 210 days after Lambeth Council’s claim for possession was upheld in court (urban75, 1999; Chambers, 1999). A piece in the *Evening Standard* quoted Lambeth Council leader Jim Dickson as declaring, ‘We are systematically clearing up the borough and dealing with the legacy of the past. Our action today sends out a very clear message to the squatters – the council will keep taking action over squatted property until there is none left’ (Chambers, 1999). Earlier in the year, in the *South London Press*, Dickson claimed that this stance was grounded on Lambeth Council’s ‘major programme to regenerate the borough’ (Perry, 1999, p. 4). ‘We are building new schools, providing new youth facilities, and improving tenant homes’, he was quoted as saying (Perry, 1999, p. 4). ‘To do that,’ he added, ‘we need to make sure that all the assets the council has like 121 Railton Road are used to contribute to this major programme’ (Perry, 1999, p. 4).



Figure 7-11: 121 Railton Road on the 31st of August 2019. It now houses two flats (HM Land Registry, 2019).

Four months later, the 121 Centre’s occupiers issued a report highlighting the losses that Lambeth Council’s ‘regeneration’ programme had incurred for many of Lambeth’s inhabitants. ‘In the last few months’, they wrote, ‘a number of schools and libraries have been slated to close, large numbers of squats have been evicted and community centres, migrant advice centres and adventure playgrounds shut’ (urban75, 1999). As this was happening, they noted, ‘New Labour councillors have voted themselves 100% pay rises’ (urban75, 1999). The

Centre's occupiers located their actions within a broader context of 'intensif[ying] ... local resistance' to the loss of vital places (urban75, 1999). In their account, 'Disabled users of the Centre for Independent Living (CIL) have occupied their space and maintained services without council funding for a number of months [and the] Lambeth Save Our Schools group has united parent, student and teacher opposition to education cuts and staged a number of demos and disrupted council meetings' (urban75, 1999). Dickson, as before, was unmoved, and seemed to understand the 121 Centre occupation as an attempted sabotage on Brixton itself. 'If the people in there want to try and rent another property and they feel they are running a valuable community programme they can', he told the *South London Press*. 'They can pour all the tea in the Boston Harbour', he added, 'but it won't stop people from coming to Brixton because it's safer, cleaner and a great place to live and work' (Perry, 1999, p. 4). 121 Railton Road has since been converted to private flats (Figure 7-11). 'Losing that space totally breaks my heart, still,' Kath told me, 18 years later.

By the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, many queer groups in Britain, elsewhere in Europe and beyond established themselves within the anarchist strands of the alterglobalisation movement (Brown, 2007; Eleftheriadis, 2015).¹⁷ The events of late September 1998 in Brixton reverberated widely within those networks. Queer collectives around the world adopted the concept of Queeruption and, under its banner, grounded and explored queerness in their own contexts. 'Queeruption, as a name, became a sort of international phenomenon,' explains Kath. As she tells it, the members of AnarQuist did not foresee this. 'We just did this one-off event in Brixton, called it Queeruption, and thought, "That's it"', she told me. 'We didn't even think about, "Let's do Queeruption 2 next year," or anything,' she explained. 'None of us thought ahead like that. We just got on with what we were doing'. To date, Queeruption events have taken place in New York City, San Francisco, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney, Barcelona, Tel-Aviv, Vancouver, Manchester and Budapest (Kouri-Towe, 2008; Queeruption Festival Budapest, 2017; Taylor, 2014; Vanelslander, 2007). A second London Queeruption took place in 2004, in east London (Brown, 2007).

In considering the squatted 121 Centre as a material site of queer knowledge production, this chapter has developed a key aim of this thesis – to explore the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. It has demonstrated that, being grounded in the (often paganism-

¹⁷ Writing about the UK 'radical climate movement' of the mid- to late-2000s, Bertie Russell observed that – much like the environmental activism of the 1990s touched on in this chapter – it continued to be characterised by 'its commitment to taking direct action and an underlying orientation towards anarchist, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian perspectives' (Russell, 2015, p. 223). Indeed, Russell argues that it 'emerged with a heritage in the alter-globalisation "movement of movements" and, before that, the UK's anti-roads and reclaim the streets movements' of the 1990s (Russell, 2015, p. 223).

infused) DIY culture of late 1990s England that coalesced in response to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, the members of AnarQuist developed a localised queer theory with different emphases, priorities, texts, connections and lineages to those of queer theory as it is most commonly thought of and located. The contexts in which AnarQuist, the 121 Centre and Queeruption came together – including, crucially, their location in Brixton – presented particular issues, dynamics, exclusions, tensions, histories and implications to work through. Further, this chapter has argued that squatting was crucial to these endeavours. Squatting provided opportunities for AnarQuist to come together, develop their politics, and engage in a process of spatial assertiveness in and transformation of the 121 Centre, which sowed the seeds for Queeruption. Organising Queeruption in a squatted social centre allowed the members of AnarQuist to organise the festival for virtually no money and to make it free, in line with their politics. The abundance of squats in 1990s Brixton more broadly enabled it to become a hub of political activity, and for the development of a strong infrastructure which the members of AnarQuist could draw on to organise Queeruption. The size of the squatted 121 Centre also constrained the festival in key ways, however, and worked against the organisers' aim to make the festival as accessible as possible. Conversely, for many of those who were able to participate in the festival, the small space of the 121 Centre fostered a certain politically-generative intimacy.

This chapter contributes to understandings of squatting in England by exploring the complex, contradictory and messy processes through which an explicitly political and experimental project came together in a squat – processes which the literature on squatting in England has long alluded to, but seldom explored. This chapter additionally contributes to literature on squatting in England by exploring time periods, spaces, politics and projects which the literature has largely neglected, and by centering the ways in which gender, race and sexuality operated within and around this squat-based project. Finally, this chapter contributes to queer geographies and anarchist geographies, as well as scholarship on queer festivals as sites of knowledge production.

Sixteen years after Queeruption, another collective squatted a building in Brixton, with the aim of hosting a two-week social centre and exploring queer struggles in the context of the austerity measures imposed by the UK's Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-2015. It is to this project that the next chapter turns.

ASIDE: Brockwell Lido – Exploding Cinema’s Dive-In Show

The DIY film-making and -screening collective Exploding Cinema formed in 1991 at the CoolTan Suntan Lotion factory on Effra Road, hosting its first screening there on Sunday 10 November 1991 (Exploding Cinema, 2014; Exploding Cinema, 2019; Szczelkun, 2003). After CoolTan was evicted from the factory at 67 Effra Road in 1992, Exploding Cinema screenings moved to a number of different locations (Exploding Cinema, 2014). On 7 August 1993 the collective hosted a now legendary show in Brixton’s squatted Brockwell Lido, in Brockwell Park (Exploding Cinema, 2013; Exploding Cinema, 2014; Szczelkun, 2003).

Opened in 1937, the lido was closed down by Lambeth Council in the early 1990s (Bedingfield, 2013). In the summer of 1993 it was occupied by squatters who lived in the disused changing rooms and in the offices around the pool; the lido was then used as a site for a number of raves, art exhibitions and poetry recitals (Bedingfield, 2013; Exploding Cinema, 2013; Exploding Cinema, 2014; Szczelkun, 2003; Urban, 2013d). Dubbed ‘The Dive-In Show’, Exploding Cinema’s event there drew an audience of over 2,000 people (Bedingfield, 2013; Exploding Cinema, 2013; Exploding Cinema, 2014; Szczelkun, 2003; Urban, 2013d). Several screenings, musical acts and installations ran in parallel, taking place in the changing rooms, in the poolside café and in the drained pool (Szczelkun, 2003; Urban, 2013d).*



Figure 7-12: A performance in process during Exploding Cinema’s ‘Dive-In Show’ event (still from footage of the event captured by Despite TV) (Exploding Cinema, 2013)..

* Footage of the ‘The Dive-In Show’ at Brockwell Lido can be watched at <http://vimeo.com/67733325> (Exploding Cinema, 2013). The collective continues to host screenings to this day, and has hosted shows internationally (Exploding Cinema, 2019).

Chapter 8 / ‘An enormous amount of pressure that came from ... a desire for something better’: Affect, infrastructure and queer squatting in 2010s Brixton

Introduction

[T]hat is one of the hardest things about coming up against walls: ... There is so much to be against; we know this. But how easily anger can spill, can spill at those who happen to be nearby, who are the closest to us. How easily in being against something we can risk those who are with us, who are for us, who we are with and for ... The costs of struggling against injustices can be personal: indeed they are often personal; we can lose those who matter.

Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 172)

On Friday 27 June 2014, an article appeared on the news website Brixton Buzz: ‘It looks like a taste of old Brixton has returned,’ it read, ‘with the news that squatters have taken over the old Joy fashion store in Coldharbour Lane, Brixton’ (Urban, 2014b). Hours earlier, six people carrying a ladder had made their way down a stretch of south London, walking from a squat in Kennington down to the Brixton end of Coldharbour Lane. Those six people were among the members of the House of Brag, a queer, anti-racist, feminist squatting collective of which I was also a part.¹ In the morning rush, the six arrived at 430-432 Coldharbour Lane, just off Brixton’s Windrush Square. In a matter of minutes, they had leaned the ladder against the building and climbed inside through an open second-floor window, which other members of the collective had spotted days earlier. The House of Brag’s plan was to hold a two-week social centre in the building – the fourth iteration of the collective’s London Queer Social Centre project. The Centre was scheduled to open on Sunday the 29th of June, the day after the 2014 Pride in London Parade. ‘The first London Pride was organised in 1972 on the anniversary of the

¹ Many House of Brag members sought to deploy the term ‘queer’ as well as terms and concepts associated with it in the mid-2010s (such as ‘non-binary’ and gender-neutral’) in critical and qualified ways, as the following exchange shows. The House of Brag explicitly identified as a *feminist* as well as a queer collective, and queer, for many of its members, was not seen as superseding terms, political projects and identifications such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘feminist’ in a linear, teleological manner. ‘Most feminisms havent [sic] offered us a way out of essentialised womanhood,’ wrote a House of Brag member who identifies as lesbian, dyke, queer and non-binary, ‘but our movements built as reactions to that are also flawed and liable to replicate misogyny in different ways when we don’t seek out and incorporate [sic] non-essentialist feminisms that specifically address and include womanhood’. As they clarified, ‘I’m still they/them personally lol I’m just blatantly sub posting some annoying fucking commentary implying being gender neutral is more of a fuck you than being a woman...’. ‘Not even a fan of the “not gay as in happy [but queer as in fuck you]” one’, responded another House of Brag member, in reference to the popular slogan. This was, he added, because he saw it as ‘[s]o self-congratulatory. Gay people can and have been rad, and calling yourself queer doesn’t make you rad’. ‘Exactly’, wrote the first poster. ‘I hate “queer as in fuck you” with a passion’.



LONDON QUEER SOCIAL CENTRE - A MONSTROUS ALTERNATIVE TO CORPORATE PRIDE

The House of Brag presents 2014's London Queer Social Centre, running from June 29th to July 12th at a squatted space in central London (location to be announced shortly before opening).

The first London Pride was organised in 1972 on the anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York. It was organised out of squats; it explicitly stated in its literature links to anti-racism, feminism and class struggle; and the march was led by a Black steel band.

Pride London 2014 gets pots of cash from sponsors including Barclays, CitiGroup, CMS (taxation lawyers) and Baker & McKenzie (global business lawyers). But grassroots and community groups still have to pay to march. And they get to march alongside the armed forces, cops, and corporations. Pride events in Soho bars and elsewhere are often inaccessible to disabled queers, and almost always inaccessible to queers with little money. We've seen and experienced racism, cultural appropriation, transphobia, ageism and sexism from Pride attendees who are disconnected from Pride's origins, and who have lost all sense of queer politics, anger and solidarity.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

House Of Brag want to take Pride back to its militant, intersectional roots – but with new ideas as well. It wants to provide a badly needed space for excluded queers to come together, take action, to celebrate and – with 'Monstrous Pride' as this year's theme – to unleash the impolite, unapologetic queer monsters that official Pride would rather house-train, restrain and neuter.

The London Queer Social Centre will be two weeks of workshops, talks, arts, music, caucuses, direct action, parties and monstrous radical queer revolution.

Figure 8-1: Press release put out by the House of Brag ahead of the opening of the fourth London Queer Social Centre, side A (House of Brag, 2014a).

Stonewall riots,' read a press release put out by the collective (Figures Figure 8-1Figure 8-2). 'It was organised out of squats; it explicitly stated in its literature links to anti-racism, feminism and class struggle' (House of Brag, 2014a). The collective's two-week social centre was to be a response to 2014's official Pride celebrations. We saw these as exemplifying and furthering a neoliberal politics of selective equality, assimilation and legitimation which actively upholds

"Pride London has been warped beyond recognition by all the money. We want to create a celebration and a protest that centres on the marginalised and the grass-roots, because this is where progressive social change has always come from, not from banks and corporations."
Danni, organiser, House O f Brag.

"We don't need money to shout out loud and we don't need to politically sanitize the message to be heard."
Mixmax, volunteer, House of Brag.

"We are demanding liberation and social justice, we shouldn't have to file an application to pay £150 for permission to be chaperoned by the police down the pre-approved route."
Stee, volunteer, House O f Brag.

"Police approval and a Barclay's card play no part in my queerness. So I'm playing no part in their marketing exercise."
Clippy, organiser, House of Brag.

SOMETHING MONSTROUS IS COMING.

LONDON QUEER SOCIAL CENTRE: JUNE 29TH TO JULY 12TH

For further information, quotes, images etc. please email HouseOfBrag@gmail.com. You can also find out more at the House O f Brag website, follow @HouseOfBrag on twitter, and find us on facebook.

We will follow up this initial release with the full programme and the venue address just before we open.

About the House of Brag:
The House of Brag is a collective of queer-identifying Londoners who for the last two years have squatted a series of abandoned buildings in south London, making them freely accessible to the queer community and to locals alike, providing resources to meet, exchange ideas, organise and resist oppression. In 2014, we're back. And **this time, we're scary.**

Figure 8-2: Press release put out by the House of Brag ahead of the opening of the fourth London Queer Social Centre, side B (House of Brag, 2014a).

the nation-state, capitalism, patriarchy and racism; as exemplifying a politics of 'queer complicity' (Oswin, 2004, p. 83) which depends on the exclusion of queers of colour, illegalised migrants, sex workers, people with HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities and trans and gender-variant people, among others (Duggan, 2002; Feliciantonio & Brown, 2015; Love, 2007; Oswin, 2004; Podmore, 2013). The police's participation in official London Pride

marches, for example, was (and is) to us, emblematic of these dynamics, and so we refused to march alongside them.² The House of Brag, our press release declared, ‘want to take Pride back to its militant, intersectional roots – but with new ideas as well’ (House of Brag, 2014a). The theme the collective had decided on for the fourth iteration of the Centre was ‘Monstrous Pride’ – in reference to a text many in the collective had found moving and evocative earlier in the year (little light, 2007)³ as well as the collective’s stated desire to ‘unleash the impolite, unapologetic queer monsters that official Pride would rather house-train, restrain and neuter’ (House of Brag, 2014a, n.p.). As with previous iterations of the London Queer Social Centre, we sought to explore queer struggles in the context of the austerity measures imposed by the UK’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-2015. More broadly, ‘our stated aims were something like “Creating space for ... queer folk in London to ... organise, socialise ... and educate, agitate,”’ House of Brag member Ren reminded me during an interview. The programme of events included ‘know your rights’ workshops on squatting law and police powers; discussions on trans and queer healthcare; workshops on self-defence, electrics, bike mechanics and computer security; and panel discussions with members of groups such as Sex Workers Open University, Disabled People Against Cuts and Behind Bars (House of Brag, 2014b). Crucially, another aim for the space was to provide a home for some members of the collective in need of a place to live – which would, ideally, last beyond the end of the social centre. We did not suspect, at the outset, that that social centre would be the collective’s last project. Police harassment, burn-out, difficult living conditions and political and personal clashes meant that by the time the social centre ended, so had the collective.

As John Horton and Peter Kraftl have noted, accounts of activism tend to over-simplify the complexities of activism and the ‘banal, messy, faltering ways in which activism happens’ (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, pp. 16-17). Literature on geographies of affect, emotions and social movements has, indeed, tended to minimise conflict as well as affects and emotions commonly perceived as negative; crucially, these literatures have also largely overlooked the complex *material* geographies of spaces of activism (Wilkinson, 2009). Similarly, although there is some invaluable work on the creation of queer autonomous spaces (including squats) that explores their emotional and affective dynamics, this literature has not engaged with the materiality of such spaces beyond addressing their successful transformation by activists

² Many of us had previous direct experience of police violence; more broadly, our stance was that the police’s present and historical function was the enforcement and (re)production of a deeply unjust sociopolitical status quo by the suppression, through the most coercive forms of state power, of the poor, the non-white and the gender-non-conforming (Vitale, 2017).

³ A member of the collective wrote the entire text (visible at takingsteps.blogspot.com/2007/01/seam-of-skin-and-scales.html) on one of the walls of the main ground-floor space at 430-432 Coldharbour Lane.

(Brown, 2007; Wilkinson, 2009). In the context of this chapter's aims, it is also important to note that, as Sarah Marie Hall has observed, geographical work on post-2008 austerity has focused on its large-scale financial repercussions, thus largely neglecting intimate geographies of austerity (Hall, 2017).

Addressing these gaps, this chapter pieces together an affective and infrastructural geography of the House of Brag's last project. It explores the intimacies of collective anti-austerity organising, empowerment and resistance as intertwined with conflict, disappointment, exhaustion and material spaces. In foregrounding these issues, this chapter further extends the arguments about the co-constitution of the spatial and the political that this thesis develops. Drawing on interviews with members of the House of Brag, on material produced by the collective and on my own experiences, I argue that the material space and infrastructure of the squat were imbricated in affective dynamics which eventually led to the House of Brag's dissolution. Efforts to think and live social and political alternatives – and the affective dynamics that sustain these efforts – cannot, I argue, be abstracted from their material geographies or their difficulties. In what follows, I begin by outlining the literature this chapter draws on. I then offer a brief history of the House of Brag, before exploring, for the rest of this chapter, the concerns set out above.

Affect, atmosphere and infrastructure in spaces of activism, protest and resistance

In charting an affective and infrastructural geography of the House of Brag's last project, this chapter draws broadly on literature on squatting, literature on emotions and activism, literature on affect and affective atmospheres, and on Abdoumalig Simone's concept of people as infrastructure (2004).

The last decade has seen a growing interest in geographical scholarship on the spatialities of emotions and affect, as well as on the spaces of activism (Brown & Pickerill, 2009a). Alongside this, there has been an increase in work that foregrounds emotions in social movements (Wilkinson, 2009). After all, 'feeling and emotion are,' as Deborah Gould reminds us, 'fundamental to political life' (Gould, 2009, p. 3). However, as noted above, 'negative' affects and emotions are often underexplored in relation to social movements. Further, as noted above, although there is some invaluable work on the creation of queer autonomous spaces (including squats) that explores their emotional and affective dynamics, they do not engage with the materiality of these spaces beyond addressing their successful transformation by

activists (Brown, 2007; Wilkinson, 2009). More broadly, geographical explorations of the emotional and affective spaces of queer organising remain, overall, few and far between (Johnston, 2017).

It is commonly assumed that ‘negative’ affects – such as despair and depression – hold no political potential, and that they inevitably destroy political projects (Gould, 2009). As many feminist, Black, and queer scholars have shown, however, that is not always the case (Ahmed, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Gould, 2009). In different ways, these scholars have troubled ‘distinctions between positive and negative feelings so as not to presume that they are separate from one another’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 6; Ahmed, 2010). Indeed, what Berlant has called ‘the desire for the political’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 2) – which they define as ‘a desire for intimacy, sociality, affective solidarity, and happiness’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 252) – is often impossible to separate fully from ‘instability, fragility, depression [and] dissociation’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). Politics that ‘take as a starting point a critique of the world as it is, and a belief that the world can be different,’ argues Sara Ahmed, often stem from and negotiate ‘strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism’ (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 162-163). Despair, stress, and other negative affects, then, are not *necessarily* demobilizing. It just so happens that in the case of the House of Brag’s last project they, for the most part, were. In exploring what was at stake in that project, however, it is crucial that we do not naturalize feelings and their effects – especially if we seek to explore the emotional and affective complexities of collective political organising (Gould, 2009).

Although I draw on and position this intervention in part within literature on *emotions* and social movements, my aim here is to piece together an *affective* geography of the House of Brag’s last project. Some clarification is thus in order. The relationship between affect and emotion is heavily contested (Bondi & Davidson, 2011; Curti, et al., 2011; Pile, 2010). Although some use these terms interchangeably (Gould, 2009; Pellegrini & Puar, 2009), some traditions draw sharp distinctions between them: ‘Affect’ often ‘signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 4) that ‘fail to be brought into ... language’ (Gould, 2009, pp. 37-38); ‘emotion’, meanwhile, signals ‘cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, pp. 3-4; Gould, 2009). There is no single or stable approach to affect in contemporary human geography and no firm consensus on its relation to emotion and other associated concepts (Anderson, 2009). Some geographers have resisted efforts to delineate sharp conceptual boundaries between them, pointing to ‘the reduction associated with clear categorisation’ (Bondi & Davidson, 2011, p. 595). Here, drawing on Ann Cvetkovich, I approach affect as a

term that attends to the ‘undifferentiated “stuff” of feeling’ and spans the distinctions between emotion and affect that are central to some theories (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 4). This is due to the fact that the House of Brag members I interviewed, in discussing the collective’s last project, primarily expressed their feelings over the course of the project by describing situations, dynamics and processes rather than naming legible, specific emotions. They did occasionally name particular emotions, although they did so tentatively, sometimes struggling to articulate or understand what they felt or meant. Affect, in its amenability to elusiveness, collectivity, and open-endedness is more apt, I feel, for grappling with what was at stake in those conversations and is at stake in this chapter. Further, affect has been fruitfully deployed by geographers to explore people’s relations to their surroundings. This has often been done through the concept of *atmosphere* (Sumartojo & Pink, 2019), which can be conceived as ‘the tone of a space, its mood, ambience, sense or feeling’ (Wall, 2019, p. 146), resulting from ‘specific configurations of sensation, temporality, movement, memory, [and] material and immaterial surroundings’ (Sumartojo & Pink, 2019, p. 6). The concept of atmosphere is helpful, here, in attending to questions of infrastructure, affect, collectivity and space.

Finally, I draw on Simone’s concept of *people as infrastructure*. Infrastructure is commonly understood as systems of, among other things, buildings, pipes and wires (Simone, 2004) – elements which this chapter attends to. Simone, however, extends the notion of infrastructure to *people’s activities* in a city (Simone, 2004; McFarlane & Vasudevan, 2014). *People as infrastructure*, in Simone’s formulation, describes how people, in combination with objects, spaces and practices, engage in tentative and often precarious processes of reproducing life in cities (Simone, 2004; McFarlane & Vasudevan, 2014). This chapter utilises this concept in order to attend to the infrastructure that developed around the social centre, arguing that considering the affective dimensions of such infrastructures is vital in order to understand the complexities of how these infrastructures are experienced as well as maintained.

Together, these literatures and concepts inform this chapter’s exploration of the imbrications of material space, infrastructure and affect in the House of Brag’s last squatted social centre – which, as I will argue, shaped the collective’s dynamics and work, and eventually led to its end.

‘... some kind of, uh, queer community space in London’: The Beginnings of the House of Brag

The House of Brag first came together in 2012, in a period marked by rising inequalities spurred by drastic cuts to public services (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Felicianantonio & Brown, 2015; Hall, 2017). Enforcing a seemingly unassailable ‘neoliberal rationality’ (Felicianantonio & Brown, 2015, p. 965), the United Kingdom’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-2015 justified these cuts as a common-sense and absolutely necessary response to the 2008 global financial crisis (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Felicianantonio & Brown, 2015; Hall, 2017). The consequences of these austerity measures continue to permeate many aspects of everyday life in the United Kingdom (Hall, 2017). As a result of these, unemployment, indebtedness, poverty and homelessness have become a reality or a very real possibility for an increasing number of people (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Felicianantonio & Brown, 2015). Among these, young queer people face considerable hurdles in obtaining housing from local authorities (Jackson, 2016); in this context, an Albert Kennedy Trust report concluded that ‘[y]oung people who identify as LGBT are grossly over-represented within youth homeless populations’ (The Albert Kennedy Trust, 2014, p. 6). Coming across similar information in 2012 made a strong impact on Khalil, one of the main initiators of the House of Brag. ‘It framed a lot of the ways that I was thinking about the cuts,’ he explained – specifically, ‘how the cuts disproportionately affect women, and ... people of colour, and – and it’s all politicised’.

Against this background, as noted in Chapter 2 and 4, the government introduced an amendment to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPOA), which came into force in September 2012 (Nowicki, 2017; Vasudevan, 2017; Weatherley, 2012). Section 144 of the LASPOA criminalised squatting in residential buildings (including vacant buildings), evidencing an emphasis on protecting *vacant* residential buildings as investments over a need for shelter – in an example of what some have identified as a drive to criminalise people in poverty (Cobb & Fox, 2007; Felicianantonio & Brown, 2015; Fox O’Mahony, et al., 2015b; Nowicki, 2017).⁴

In 2012, Khalil was in his final year at university in the south of England and working a part-time job. In a context in which austerity was ‘the “background noise” of everyday life’ (Hitchen, 2019, p. 7), he was experiencing severe financial difficulties and struggling with debilitating anxiety. With the end of university approaching rapidly, the fact that he ‘didn’t

⁴ As detailed in Chapter 2, this is not to say that criminal charges could not previously be brought against squatters for a number of reasons (under the Criminal Law Act of 1977 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, for example). Crucially, however, the very *act of squatting* in residential properties had not, in and of itself, been a criminal offence.

really have any place to land afterwards’ became ever more pressing for him. ‘I was disowned for being gay,’ he explained. Thus, for him, ‘queerness and homelessness ... felt quite powerfully linked quite early on’. ‘I started considering squatting because ... my mental health had just been degraded so much’, he remembered. ‘I was an absolute mess in my final year [of university]’. Months away from finishing his degree but unable to cope any longer, he quit university and his job, moved to London and began squatting.

While still at university, Khalil and some friends ‘had been ... thinking about doing some kind of, uh, queer community space in London’. At the time, his friends were ‘trying to pursue something rented,’ but Khalil was not interested in that – not least because of the large sums of money he felt would be required for such a project. Instead, he threw himself into learning as much as he could about ‘how to run a [squatted] social centre and stuff, from all of these different people’. Eventually, the friends Khalil had been discussing establishing a queer community space with began to make their way to London as well, and they embraced the idea of setting up a squatted space. Along with people Khalil had met in London, they began to discuss ‘what we [were] going to do, what we [were] going to organise’. This nascent collective settled on a name for their queer community space: The London Queer Social Centre. They squatted an abandoned community centre at 42 Braganza Street, in Kennington, and the first London Queer Social Centre opened there on Saturday the 13th of October 2012 (House of Brag, 2012a; House of Brag, 2012b). It was there that the collective behind it took the name ‘House of Brag’. As Khalil explained, some members of the collective ‘were really into [the film] *Paris is Burning* (1990) ... and they loved the idea of ... having a “House of” something’.⁵ As the building was on Braganza Street, the name ‘House of Braganza’ was suggested – that, however, is ‘the Portuguese royal family,’ as Khalil noted. The name ‘House of Brag’ was settled on instead. That first London Queer Social Centre hosted events up until its eviction on Tuesday the 13th of November 2012 (House of Brag, 2012c; House of Brag, 2012d). The second iteration of the London Queer Social Centre took place in a squatted ex-Buddhist centre at 36 Carlisle Lane, in the South Bank area, between December 2012 and early 2013 (House of Brag, 2012e; House of Brag, 2012f). The third iteration once again took place in Kennington, between the 22nd of June and the 6th of July 2013, in an abandoned pub at 63

⁵ ‘Houses’ are at the core of Ballroom culture, which originated in urban poor and working class Black and Latinx queer communities in the United States. Ballroom culture ‘uses performance to forge and celebrate alternative gender and sexual identities, kinship, and community’ (Bailey, 2013, p. x). Within Ballroom culture, houses are ‘family-like structures’ (Bailey, 2013, p. 5). Houses ‘walk’ (compete) against one another in ‘balls’ judged on ‘categories based on the deployment of performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes’ (Bailey, 2013, p. 5). Contemporary Ballroom culture was first captured in mainstream media in Jennie Livingston’s (1990) documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (Bailey, 2013).

Sancroft Street (and it was over the course of that iteration of the Centre that I first encountered the House of Brag) (House of Brag, 2013). By the time work towards the fourth London Queer Social Centre began, the core collective behind it – those who were involved in the day-to-day organising and running of it – consisted of about 12 people of various genders and abilities (although it must be emphasised that many more people were involved to varying degrees).⁶ The youngest was 18 years old and the oldest was 28. Approximately two-thirds of this core collective were white, while a third were people of colour. The core collective was evenly divided between people who had grown up working-class and those who had grown up middle-class (but were enduring varying levels of precarity). All but two were squatters.

Affect, infrastructure and the creation of queer autonomous space

‘The electricity and the water was the fucked-up thing, right?’: ‘Collective world-making’ and infrastructure

As Vasudevan has noted, squats are often ‘place[s] of collective *world-making*’ (Vasudevan, 2017, p. 43, emphasis in original). For Gavin Brown, squatting is a practice that can ‘open up a *discursive* space in which social and political alternatives become thinkable again’ (Brown, 2007, p. 2696, emphasis added). During the beginning of the fourth London Queer Social Centre, for some in the House of Brag this certainly felt true. The collective’s first few days at 430-432 Coldharbour Lane were spent materially transforming the building. Murals were painted, a stage was assembled, a sleeping area was created, banners were hung and an accessible toilet was built from scratch (Figure 8-3). What followed, however, is a reminder that attending to the affective dynamics, materiality and infrastructures of these attempts at collective world-making is crucial. As Brown and Jenny Pickerill have noted, ‘we need to pay attention to the different spaces of activism in order to better understand the complexities of the relationship between emotions and activism’ (Brown & Pickerill, 2009b, p. 33). Key to these complexities are their material and infrastructural dimensions.

The fourth London Queer Social Centre opened on the 29th of June with an invitation, advertised on social media, to help get the building ready for the start of the programme of events on Wednesday the 2nd of July (House of Brag, 2014d). As the Centre was based in what

⁶ A focus on questions of disability and accessibility had been central to the House of Brag from its inception. One of the members was deaf, others were neurodivergent in a range of ways and some negotiated a variety of chronic illnesses.



House Of Brag @HouseOfBrag · 29 Jun 2014
work in progress



1 4 2

Figure 8-3: A mural being painted and a stage being built in the main ground-floor space at 430-432 Coldharbour Lane, on the opening day of the fourth London Queer Social Centre. The mural features an image of Olive Morris and reads, 'Never forget Olive Morris, a squatter from Brixton who gave BLACK families solace' (House of Brag, 2014c).

had been a Joy chain store, it became known among House of Brag members as 'Joy Brag'.⁷ This proved to be bitterly ironic. From the moment the House of Brag advertised the location of the Centre, it faced sustained police harassment. The Metropolitan Police's aggressive response was, at least in part, due to the fact that an inquiry had been launched into their handling of an unlicensed rave held in a disused Royal Mail office in East Croydon two weeks earlier (BBC News, 2014a; BBC News, 2014b). The window of a police van had been smashed and 'missiles' had been thrown at officers during the rave (BBC News, 2014b). Tragically, a 15-year-old boy in attendance died from multiple organ failure and acute intoxication after taking ecstasy (BBC News, 2016). Despite our pointing both to the schedule of events and the rationale for opening the Centre that we had circulated, the police insisted that these were a cover to host a rave. They were, however, unable to enter the building, as our occupation was legal under the terms of LASPOA Section 144. There was a sense that the fact that we were

⁷ See joythystore.com for more information on the chain.



Figure 8-4: Members of the House of Brag as well as allies responded to the police's show of force by putting themselves between the police and the building (notice how close the smiling officer is standing to the House of Brag member by the door, in an attempt at intimidation).

squatters – with all the associations with criminality that entailed, and the visceral reactions that such associations evoke in some – made the police determined to shut the Centre down.

Illan rua Wall suggests that ‘there are affective considerations in all forms of public order tactics’ (Wall, 2019, p. 156). His readings of British public order manuals identify a number of police tactics that, he argues, are specifically designed to establish control over large groups of people and the spaces they occupy by attempting to manage or change their atmospheres (Wall, 2019). One such tactic is ‘strategic facilitation,’ which involves the deployment of ‘protest liaison officers’ to ‘soften the mood’ of a crowd (Wall, 2019, p. 145). On Tuesday the 1st of July, two LGBT-liaison officers attempted to convince the collective to let them into the building. They attempted to joke with members of the collective, sometimes flirtatiously. They were not let in, and the mood shifted. Almost immediately, a police van carrying several officers arrived. The officers once again attempted to convince the collective to let them into the building, this time in an intimidating manner and making it difficult for people to enter and exit the building. This appears to have been the deployment of another police tactic – that of ‘strategic incapacitation,’ which involves ‘the interception and



Figure 8-5: ‘Police officers have been parked up outside the building all day,’ reads the Brixton Buzz piece in which this photo appeared (Urban, 2014c). The man in the blue cap and black shirt (centre) was a member of the Brixton Gay Community and stood with us as an act of solidarity.

obstruction of protesters,’ as well as the ‘disruption of assembly or convergence centers’ (Wall, 2019, p. 145). Members of the collective as well as allies responded to the police’s show of force by putting ourselves between them and the building (Figures Figure 8-4 and Figure 8-5). The police countered by cutting off water and electricity to the Centre.

‘Strategic incapacitation’ also involves ‘pre-emptive arrests’ to ‘take out ringleaders’ (or supposed ringleaders, at least) (Waddington, 2011, p. 5). Early the following morning, Ren went out into the street to attempt to turn the water – which had been turned off at the outside stop valve – back on. The police had been lying in wait; they proceeded to violently pin down and arrest Ren, claiming that they had ‘menacingly approach[ed]’ the officers while ‘brandishing a wrench’.⁸ Later that day, the House of Brag announced on their website that the event scheduled for that evening – a workshop on squatting law – would still take place (House of Brag, 2014e). ‘Tonight’s programme is pretty relevant,’ the announcement read. ‘[T]he cops are trying their best to make everything much harder since they can’t find any legit legal reason to shut us down’ (House of Brag, 2014e). As Ren remembered, there had been a sense ‘of at least a couple of cops out there, kind of watching us constantly’. An atmosphere of paranoid expectancy had set in. Attempts to manipulate affective atmospheres, however, do not *necessarily* work as they are intended (Wall, 2019). Atmospheres, according to Shanti

⁸ A year later, the case against Ren was thrown out of court. Nonetheless, living for a full year with the possibility of being incarcerated caused Ren considerable distress.

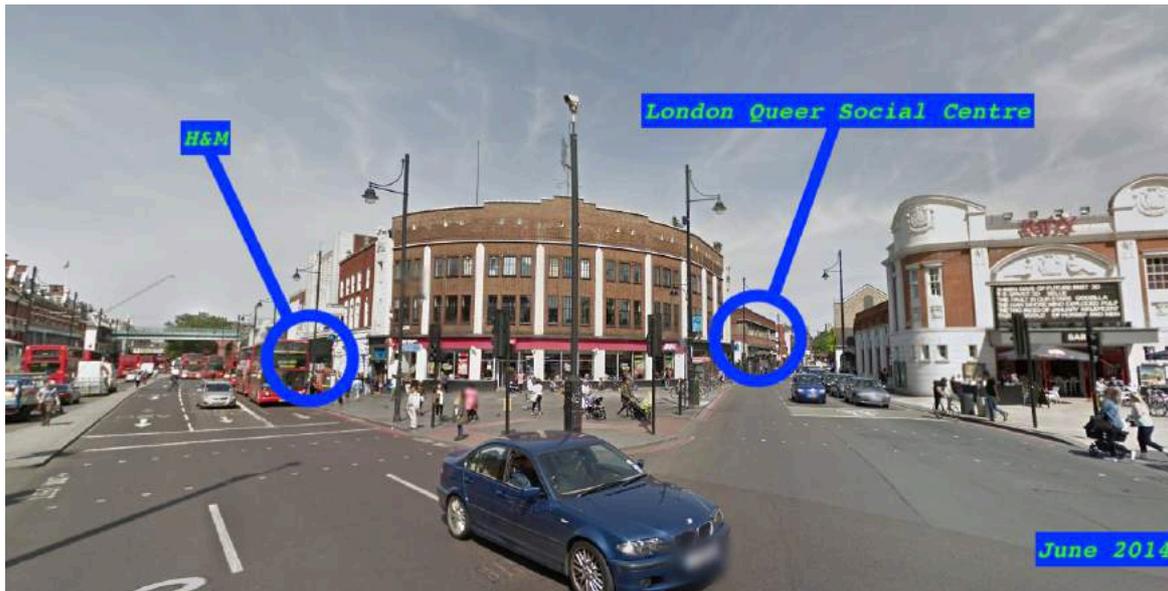


Figure 8-6: View of both the fourth London Queer Social Centre (at 430-432 Coldharbour Lane) and the H&M store (at 457-461 Brixton Road), as captured by Google Maps on June 2014 (Google, 2014). The fuse box for 430-432 Coldharbour Lane was located in the H&M, and so we could not access it when police turned off the power to the Centre.

Sumartojo and Sarah Pink (2019), always exceed the conditions of their emergence. At that stage, the police’s affective escalation had intimidated us, but it also strengthened our resolve. Letting them in would have given them the power to shut the Centre down, and so we were determined to keep them out.

The police’s affective escalation was also deeply material, however. In targeting our infrastructure, they struck a decisive blow. When they cut off the water and electricity to 430-432 Coldharbour Lane, we came up against the materiality of the building, as well as the material geographies of Brixton more widely. Years earlier, the building had been merged with adjacent structures along Brixton Road to create a multi-storey car park. Inner walls had been knocked down while keeping outer structures intact. Later, the cavernous space which resulted from this merging had been partitioned, in various stages, to create shops and offices. As a result, the fuse box for 430-432 Coldharbour Lane was located in a nearby H&M store at 457-461 Brixton Road – and so we could not access it (Figures Figure 8-6 and Figure 8-7). As noted above, the water had been turned off at the outside stop valve, and so we could not reach it without risking – and, in Ren’s case, enduring – arrest. These material geographies directly affected what we could and could not do to maintain the infrastructure of the Centre, which in turn created an affective atmosphere of stress and anxiety with serious consequences for the collective.

‘The electricity and the water was the fucked-up thing, right?’ remembered collective member Jaq, centering their retelling of the difficulties of the collective’s last project on infrastructural, affective and sensorial matters. The lack of water, among other things, meant

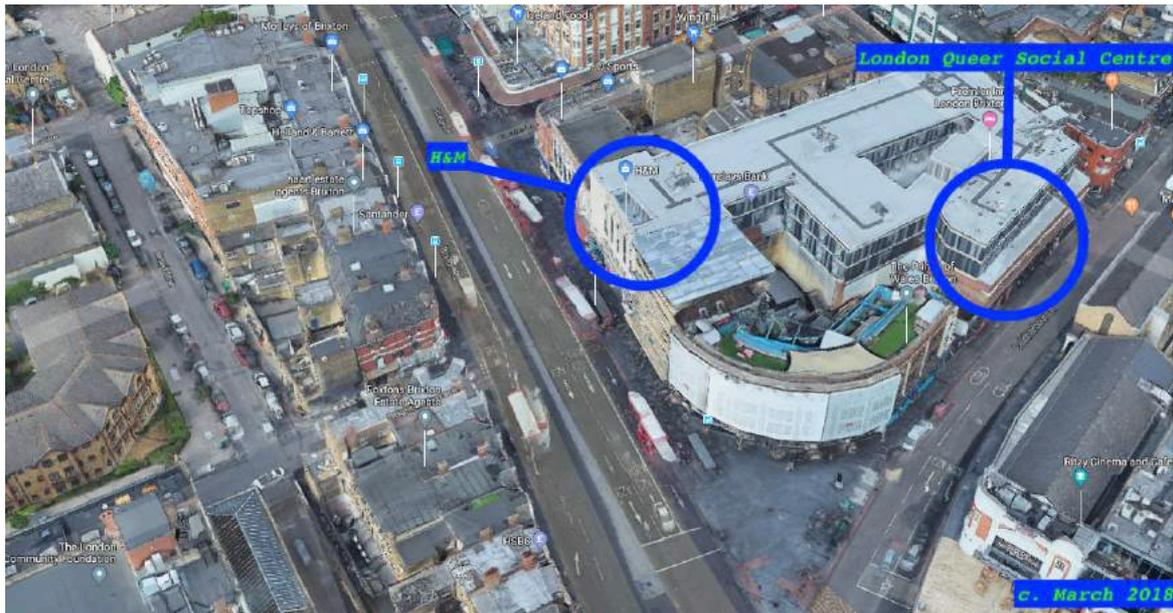


Figure 8-7: Another view of the H&M store and the building the fourth London Queer Social Centre was in, as captured by Google Maps c. March 2018 (Google, 2018). When the police cut off the water and electricity to the Centre, the House of Brag came up against the material and infrastructural geographies of Brixton. As can be seen in this image, a Premier Inn hotel has since been built on top of both the building the Centre was in as well as the H&M.

‘[n]ot being able to wash [our] hands’. The lack of electricity meant that the fridge the collective initially used in the space no longer worked – a pressing issue, especially given the intense summer heat. This led to complications with regard to storing food in the space, and to feeding people. ‘I remember there being loads of rotting meats’ recalled Jaq. ‘The smell of it ... in the space,’ became a major problem. In addition, the building’s location and the fact that windows in the upstairs sleeping space had to be kept open because of the smell meant that the collective were ‘getting, like, all the noise from Brixton High Road ... in the night’. This noise made it hard to sleep in the building. Political and personal clashes had occurred in previous iterations of the London Queer Social Centre, yet these had been negotiated, if not overcome. At 430-432 Coldharbour Lane, however, noise, heat and smell came together in a sensorially overwhelming and debilitating atmosphere, and tensions within the collective reached breaking point.

People as infrastructure

As Simone argues, cities are sometimes characterized by the ability of residents of limited means to engage in complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons and practices which become flexible, inventive and often precarious infrastructures (Simone, 2004). The operations and scopes of these infrastructures, he argues, ‘are constantly negotiated and depend on the

particular histories, understandings, networks, styles, and inclinations of the actors involved' (Simone, 2004, p. 410). It is easy to read affect as implicit in Simone's formulation. The affective dimensions of these negotiations, histories, and understandings must be explicitly recognized, however, to attend to key ways in which these infrastructures are experienced, enabled and/or thwarted.

In response to the water and electricity being cut off, an alternative infrastructure quickly developed around the Centre. It was born out of friendships cultivated over years; it was held together by solidarity and the feeling of many in London's squatter, queer and radical left scenes that the Centre was an important and necessary project. Large quantities of food for the Centre were cooked in the kitchen of the Kennington squat I and some other members of the House of Brag lived in. Using a bike trailer, I would cycle this food, cutlery and plates to the Centre for meals and then cycle everything back to be washed, several times a day. Bands performing at the Centre adapted to the space and played acoustic sets. A battery-powered, bicycle-towed sound-system known as 'Pedals' – a fixture of radical left scenes in London and beyond since the mid-2000s (56a Bikespace, 2015; Gregory, 2010) – was brought in for events. Staff at the nearby Ritzy cinema, embroiled in a pay dispute with their management, turned a blind eye when members of the collective used the cinema's toilets or spent hours in the Ritzy café, using the internet and charging phones and laptops without ordering anything. In turn, the Ritzy Living Wage Campaign used the Centre for an organising meeting.⁹ The space was also used by other local campaigning groups to meet in and to advertise their work (Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth, 2014).

Eventually, thanks to the intervention of sympathetic lawyers, the water was turned back on. Some of the collective members I interviewed, however, had no recollection of this. In their memories, the Centre remained without water for the entirety of its run. Of those who *did* remember the water having been restored, no one (including myself) could remember exactly how long we went without running water in the building. This is perhaps indicative of how deeply stress saturated the project. For some, the lack of running water and the resulting difficulties permeated *all* their memories of the Centre; for those who *did* remember the water having been turned back on, there had been so much else to deal with that even that extremely significant development is, in hindsight, a blur. Crucially, the fact that the infrastructure that formed in response to the water and electricity being cut off *worked* did not diminish the sensorially overwhelming and debilitating affective atmosphere that had set in, and the sense

⁹ For more information, see the Picturehouse Living Wage Campaign website (picturehouselivingwage.com/) and the Ritzy Living Wage Campaign's twitter (twitter.com/ritzylivingwage) and facebook (facebook.com/RitzyLivingWage/).

that the project was a failure. The stress, hostilities, sleep deprivation, noise, heat, disappointment and smell had taken their toll. What stayed with Ren from the project were the noxious atmosphere and dynamics which set in. ‘I didn’t enjoy a moment there,’ they remembered. ‘A lot of that was because ... you know, the “no electricity, no water” situation was dire. And all of the organisational team were like... completely knackered’. The collective was crumbling, and with it the infrastructure that was holding the project together. People, explained Ren, ‘kind of, like ... split into factions, and were ... at each other’s throats’.

‘We all ... wanted these things so badly’ / ‘I think a lot of it was material’

Reflecting on the process of creating queer autonomous spaces and events, Brown suggests that ‘one of the politically most important aspects of these ... is the way that they increase the intensity of affective attachment ... and connectivity’ (Brown, 2007, pp. 2695-2696). These intensities and attachments are indeed crucial. Thus, grappling with the affective complexities of collective political organising requires considering what happens when attempts to create queer autonomous spaces *impede* connectivity, or when affective attachments are experienced as sources of intense pressure, vulnerability and guilt. Further, it is imperative to attend to the material and infrastructural dimensions of these processes.

As noted above, desires for intimacy, solidarity and new socialities are often impossible to disentangle from ‘negative’ affects. ‘Activism,’ Gould notes, ‘can make us vulnerable because it is so obviously about wanting something beyond what *is*’ (Gould, 2009, p. 443, emphasis in original). In spite of all the setbacks the project had endured, some in the House of Brag did their best to hold on to the sense of excitement, collective action and empowerment that had drawn them to be a part of the fourth London Queer Social Centre. We were invested in each other, in the project and in all the work we had done. In addition, as Gould has noted, people can feel great guilt about leaving a project and those involved in it behind (Gould, 2009). ‘[I]n our different ways,’ explained collective member River, ‘we all ... wanted these things so badly – like, different ways of living, different ways of relating to one another, and ... building relationships’. The affective stakes of such endeavours can be high. Ahmed’s assertion that ‘[w]e enact the world we are aiming for; nothing less will do’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 255) conveys some of the urgency and intensity such projects can assume. ‘I think we put so much pressure on ourselves – just an enormous amount of pressure that came from, like, a desire for something better,’ explained River. For River, that desire for something *better* – something

beyond what *is* – was experienced as a source of intense stress and vulnerability. Indeed, many in the collective also felt fully depleted, and yet – in large part due to the intensity of our affective attachments to each other and to the project – we carried on. For many of us, despite its costs, the House of Brag and its projects still provided – as such organising often does – a ‘refuge from the constantly traumatizing effects of life in an oppressive society’ (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 230). This resonates with Berlant’s observation that ‘it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is ... not working’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 263). Such attachments had become, in many ways, relations of ‘cruel optimism’ – which Berlant proposes exist ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ and ‘actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 1).

This relation of ‘cruel optimism’ was deeply spatial and material. The collective had come together for the purpose of creating communal autonomous spaces, but the very process of creating, maintaining and defending the material infrastructure that would make the collective’s project possible were tearing the collective – *people as infrastructure* – apart. As David K. Seitz and Beyhan Farhadi have emphasised, ‘dreaming about and desiring other forms of collectivity’ serve to ‘bring us together’ (Seitz & Farhadi, 2019, p. 102). Their passing observation that ‘such dreaming and desiring’ can also serve to ‘simultaneously separate us from one another – and from ourselves’, however, demands closer attention (Seitz & Farhadi, 2019, p. 102). ‘We had this kind of ... thriving community ... of people who were involved in squatting together, organising together,’ recalled River. ‘[F]our or five years [on]’ however, ‘so many people don’t talk to one another ... [H]ow, how did that happen?’ they wondered. ‘I think a lot of it’, they concluded, ‘was material’. Drawing on the epigraph that opened this chapter, it could be said that, in coming up against walls, many in the collective turned against those with us, those for us, those we were with and for.

‘... a kind of solidarity ... quite intrinsic to a space’

As this chapter demonstrates, attending to the material and infrastructural dimensions of the affective dynamics of the fourth London Queer Social Centre is crucial to elucidating their intricacies. Among these intricacies is the fact that the kind of connectivity alluded to by Brown *did* occur at points during the social centre, *as a result of* the infrastructural issues that were a source of so much stress for the collective. As noted above, the police’s actions had provoked a debilitating atmosphere for the House of Brag collective. It is crucial, however, not to

conceive of the affective atmosphere of the Centre as static, or to attribute to the police undue power in *determining* the affect in and of the space once and for all. As noted above, attempts to manipulate affective atmospheres do not *necessarily* work, or work as intended (Wall, 2019). Atmospheres, we must remember, are continuously emerging and *exceeding the conditions of their emergence* – and thus always remain *just beyond control* (Sumartojo & Pink, 2019; Wall, 2019). ‘There are always,’ Wall notes, ‘too many possibilities, too many ways in which the entrainment of bodies in space might be distorted or unsettled’ (Wall, 2019, p. 148).

The police’s attempts to manipulate the affective atmosphere of the Social Centre worked *to an extent*. In some notable instances, the infrastructural issues they caused *also* fostered feelings of solidarity and safety for many participants. This was especially the case during an event called ‘Can’t Fuck, Won’t Fuck: A discussion on the limits of sex-positivity,’ which was facilitated by the writers of the zine *FUCKED: On being sexually dysfunctional in sex-positive queer scenes* (Kirsty, et al., 2014). ‘Have you ever felt left out or alienated by sex-positivity and the way it plays out in ... the spaces where you hang out?’ read the event description (House of Brag, 2014b). ‘When most ... queer spaces ... are explicitly sex-positive and/or centred around hooking up,’ the event description continued, ‘talking about sex-negative or sex-critical feelings can often make us feel like kill-joys pissing on everyone else’s sexually liberated parade’ (House of Brag, 2014b).¹⁰ That discussion was ‘really quite powerful for me,’ remembered Chlo, who first became involved with the House of Brag during the planning of the fourth London Queer Social Centre. ‘If you’ve, like... been through trauma and don’t fuck because of it,’ she explained, talking about such issues can be difficult. This might be the case ‘even in, like, a support group setting, or in an LGBT centre,’ she added, because ‘it feels slightly professionalised’. The discussion in the London Queer Social Centre, however, felt different to her. Although ‘there were a hundred people in there’ and ‘the entire floor was covered [with people],’ it ‘felt ... safe to talk about these things,’ she recalled. This was, she noted, ‘because of the nature of the building we were in’. The squatted ‘DIY nature of it,’ Chlo felt, meant that ‘there were no pretensions’. ‘It was just a load of mates running around with candles and generators ... and the stage was made out of shit,’ she elaborated. ‘It was just a load of people, just sat on the floor being friends ... There was a kind of solidarity, which I think is quite intrinsic to a space. I don’t think you could have done that in a university’. The effort that had gone into squatting, defending and running the London Queer Social Centre

¹⁰ Here, I remind the reader of the note, made in Chapter 7, that ‘a tendency within [queer] networks to associate what it means to be a “radical queer” with a very specific brand of sex radicalism’ – often involving public sex, BDSM and polyamory – has been observed, and that the ‘general horniness’ that is a central organising principle of many queer spaces has been the focus of critiques (Brown, 2007, p. 2695).

without electricity and (for a time) water – the effort that had gone into *making* that space – felt palpable to many in the *FUCKED* discussion. It made the space feel hard-fought, precious and vital, which fostered the valuable dynamics Chlo described. Paying attention to these material and infrastructural dimensions reveals how the atmosphere of instability, fragility and depression was impossible to disentangle from instances of intimacy and solidarity. In the context of the minimising of conflict and the negative in literature on geographies of affect, emotions and social movements, I would, however, caution against uncritically recuperative readings of the *FUCKED* discussion in relation to the fourth London Queer Social Centre as a whole. The collapse of the collective and the Centre led, for many, to several more long and difficult months of housing insecurity, and to the splintering of support networks. For some, it took years to recover from the burn-out they experienced during that final project and its aftermath.

Conclusion

On the 11th of July, eviction notices were served to the London Queer Social Centre (Urban, 2014d). This was one day before the Centre's programme was due to conclude with a 'Monstrous Pride' march. Against all odds, the Centre had stayed open for the duration of its programme. The day of the 'Monstrous Pride' march, however, exhaustion and a breakdown in communication meant that no one from the collective was present at the march's starting point at the advertised starting time. By the time two members of the collective arrived, they were two hours late. A handful of confused would-be marchers had sat down to wait in a nearby green area. Instead of a big closing march, the fourth London Queer Social Centre – and the House of Brag – concluded with a quiet, makeshift picnic. After a post on the 10th of July advertising the events taking place that evening, there were no further announcements from the collective until its last post, dated October 1st. It read, simply, 'kind of late but.. [sic] the house of brag social centre that was in brixton [sic] is closed ... and has been since july [sic]. sorry to see all your emails and messages asking where we are etc. hope you all had great summers. HoB x' (House of Brag, 2014f).

Even when many squatted and autonomous spaces do not achieve all, most or even some of the aims of those involved in their creation, there often remains a deep appreciation of the emotional labour that went into their making, long after these spaces are gone (Vasudevan, 2015a). Reflecting on the collective and its last project three years later, River struggled to articulate their feelings during our interview. They eventually expressed these in terms of not

just gratitude, but a process of learning: ‘I learnt *so* much,’ they explained, ‘and I’m so grateful for, like, *everything* that people ... put into that project’. This sense of gratitude and process of learning were inseparable from a feeling that River struggled to explain, or understand. Attending to affect – as ‘something that we do not quite have language for [or] fully grasp ... but is nevertheless in play’ (Gould, 2009) – is key to understanding what is at stake in such processes. ‘I guess there’s also, like, a sadness,’ River added eventually, although this naming was still being negotiated. ‘Yeah,’ River continued after a long pause, ‘There’s, like, a sadness there. But ... I’m still trying to, like, understand it’.

This chapter has pieced together an affective and infrastructural geography of the House of Brag’s last project. In arguing that attending to the imbrications of affective dynamics, materiality and infrastructures is crucial to understanding squatted attempts at collective world-making, this chapter has developed a central aim of this thesis: demonstrating the co-constitution of the spatial and the political. More broadly, this chapter has contributed to literature on squatting in England by attending to dynamics, processes, spaces and politics which this literature has largely neglected. It also contributes to literature on geographies of affect, emotions and activism – literature in which conflict as well as affects and emotions commonly perceived as negative are often minimised; and in which material geographies are overlooked. Where so much of the literature of squatting in England positions squats as simply the grounds in which people have engaged in collective political experiments, and the areas in which these experiments took place as having played an incidental role, this chapter has demonstrated that such efforts cannot be abstracted from their material, infrastructural and affective dimensions. This chapter has shown that building, painting and repairing; the materiality of 430-432 Coldharbour Lane; the infrastructural geographies of Brixton – all of these directly affected what we could and could not do, how we adapted, how we felt and how we worked together (and fell apart) as a collective.

ASIDE: *Southwyck House*

In Brixton, evidence of the GLC's and Lambeth Council's abandoned redevelopment schemes (see Chapter 4) remains in the form of Southwyck House, in Coldharbour Lane. Known locally as 'the Barrier Block', the building was expressly designed by architect Magda Borowiecka to accommodate the proposed South Cross motorway (part of the GLC's London Ringways project) and to shield its inhabitants and those of the nearby Moorland Road Estate from the noise it would entail (Anning & Simpson, 1980; Boughton, 2018; Donegal, 1995; Marshall, 2018; Piper, 1996). Construction on Southwyck House began in 1972, on the same month as plans to build the motorway were abandoned (Piper, 1996). By that time, Lambeth Council had already set aside £20 million for the project, and so Southwyck House was built anyway (Sandbrook, 2019). It was completed in 1981; the first official tenants, however, only moved in during 1982 (Donegal, 1995). By then, squatters were living in several of the flats; many of the flats would remain squatted for years (Sandbrook, 2019; urban75, 2010).



Figure 8-8: Southwyck House, circa July 2015 (Urban, 2015c).

Chapter 9 / Conclusion

Over the preceding pages, this thesis has *documented* vital spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles which the literature on squatting in England has overlooked. In doing so, it has critically *interrogated and expanded* how squatting in England has been conceptualised. It has insisted on and demonstrated the co-constitution of the spatial and the political, *spatialising* the complex material, political and affective processes through which identities, collectivities and projects are assembled, negotiated and navigated. It has dwelled on what specific squats have enabled and curtailed, and on the processes of articulation, inclusion and exclusion in the making of particular squatted spaces. Crucially, then, the geographies presented here are not geographies of squatting, broadly. These are *geographies of squatting in and through Brixton*. Squatting in the geographies of Brixton – established at the beginning of this thesis – presented, for the collectives and projects this thesis has explored, distinctive challenges and opportunities to come together, assert themselves, live and organise communally, resist and theorise. Being based in Brixton means they addressed and were shaped by particular political, cultural and legal contexts, as well as built, material environments. Brixton, as I have argued, shaped the collectives, projects and spaces explored here in fundamental ways. These collectives and projects responded to contexts, histories, dynamics and needs particular to their location; they, in turn, profoundly shaped Brixton. Importantly, the exclusions around which they were formed must also be seen as situated and place-based.

Chapter 5 grappled with the terms, identifications, politics and exclusions through which the BGC was assembled, built and demarcated. It argued that squatting and the particular geographies of Brixton provided the BGC's inhabitants with specific opportunities to both come together *as* and actively explore *what a gay community could be*. Squatting neighbouring houses meant that they were able to actively adapt their built environment and create spaces which strengthened both a sense of community as well as a demarcation from, uneasy proximity to and occasional overlap with a predominantly Black queer scene in Brixton. The racialised fear, alienation, desire, unknowing and misrecognition expressed by inhabitants of the BGC with regard to Pearl's clientele and Black men who ventured into the BGC; the concentration of those with 'hippie' politics in a particular house, apart from the 'communist hardliners'; the 'coup' staged by the bisexual 'Nerds' at the South London Gay Community Centre; the tensions around women living in the BGC and the relationships that the men of the BGC had with them – all of these were intensely political conflicts which cannot be abstracted

from their spatial and territorial dimensions, and representative of the complex dynamics we must ground deployments of squatting in.

Chapter 6 located the BBWG's emergence in the contexts of geographical struggles around the ongoing violences of colonialism. Squatting and the struggle for housing, in the context of the BBWG, cannot be disentangled from struggles against the policing, criminalisation, dispersal and containment of Black people in the streets, in schools, at the border and in their homes, among a range of other locations. Squatting, in the context of the BBWG, must be considered as one survival technique among many; as one claim to space in a vast network of practices and spaces of resistance and community – from 'sou sou' collectives to hairdressing salons, from supplementary schools to churches. Still, squatting, presented the BBWG with specific challenges and limitations – they worked with the constant threat of eviction and were unable to embark on long-term projects that would have required a stable base for the group. Squatting, however, enabled the group to come together, to achieve organisational autonomy, to assert a right to space and presence in a nation that insistently disavows its colonial history (and present), and to work and develop in concert with their core anti-state, decolonial and feminist politics. The tensions and dynamics which followed the group's decision to stop squatting and accept local authority funding make this clear.

Chapter 7 considered the squatted 121 Centre as a material site of queer knowledge production. It demonstrated that, being grounded in the (often paganism-infused) DIY culture of late 1990s England that coalesced in response to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, the members of AnarQuist developed a localised queer theory with different emphases, priorities, texts, connections and lineages to those of queer theory as it is most commonly thought of and located. This chapter dwelled on the ways in which the squatted 121 Centre provided opportunities for AnarQuist to come together as a collective and organise Queeruption in line with their politics; it also, however, constrained the festival in key ways, undermining some of AnarQuist's aims. Crucially, this chapter argued that the contexts in which AnarQuist, the 121 Centre and Queeruption came together – including their location in Brixton – presented particular issues, dynamics, exclusions, tensions, histories and implications to work through.

Chapter 8 explored the intimacies of collective anti-austerity organising, empowerment and resistance as intertwined with conflict, disappointment, exhaustion and material space. It argued that the material space and infrastructure of the fourth (and last) squatted London Queer Social Centre were imbricated in affective dynamics which eventually led to the House of Brag's dissolution. Efforts to think and live social and political alternatives – and the affective

dynamics that sustain these efforts – cannot, this chapter demonstrated, be abstracted from their material geographies or their difficulties.

Centering one area across decades, groups, spaces and projects means that this thesis has *grounded* these with a level of detail, complexity, nuance and depth of engagement that is missing in the literature on squatting in England. It has critically interrogated and expanded how squatting in England has been conceptualised by demonstrating that the meanings, deployments and resonances of squatting, when considered through the histories, struggles dynamics and forms of resistance explored here, are deeply distinct from those explored in the literature thus far. Insisting on the co-constitution of the spatial and the political, these explorations are not empirically generalisable, but they are important multidisciplinary interventions.

Stating that squats have provided opportunities for the collective articulation of prefigurative geographies, experiments with communal living and the building of autonomous infrastructures – without exploring their particularities – can only get us so far. It sidesteps the crucial question: What do we come up against when seeking to create these? In providing people with spaces and often with time, squatting *can* enable mobilisation and resistance, the exploration of different intimacies and the building of autonomous infrastructures – the collectives, projects and spaces explored in the preceding chapters powerfully attest to this. Crucially, however, it is precisely in the complex, specific, messy, grounded, faltering ways in which they organised for survival in the enduring afterlives of colonialism, mobilised for housing, sought to create revolutionary forms of community and intimacy, and built infrastructures for social reproduction that the collectives and projects explored in the preceding chapters might offer valuable resources.

The specificities of these experiments, politics and spaces *must* be attended to; the affective, territorial, collective and political dynamics; the processes through which identities, collectivities and projects are assembled – these *must* be spatialised. In arguing that place *matters* to how we do politics and how we conceptualise squatting, it is imperative that the embodied work of squatting spaces, of transforming them, of physically defending them, of dealing with plumbing and electricity be attended to. The work of thinking and enacting social and political alternatives *cannot be abstracted* from their material geographies. The material *limitations* embedded in particular places are as crucial as the possibilities they offer.

As this thesis has demonstrated over its chapters, the boundaries established around spaces, identities and political projects are far from self-evident or uncontested. Communities and their spaces are not pre-political, spontaneous, organic or natural. Collectivities, communal

subjectivities and political projects are constantly (re)constituted through a range of spatialised practices, processes and contestations. A de-essentialising of squatting as a practice and of squats as spaces entails a critical de-romanticisation of the notion of squat communities. Indeed, to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of power. The task, then, is to ask how categorisations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations and spaces they are co-creating.

Squatting is not, in and of itself, an emancipatory endeavour. Accounts of squatting as an inherently radical practice can obscure more than they illuminate. To consider it as such would be to abstract it from the practices and experiences of squatters, as well as their political imaginaries – the very things through which squatting *gains* meaning. It would be to evade its possible imbrications in exclusionary dynamics and projects, to circumscribe the potentialities it can open up, to strip spaces of their specificities, and to answer vital questions about what squatting enables and curtails before they are even asked.

As I wrote at the outset, I did not seek, here, to tell *the* story of squatting in Brixton, or even of decolonial, feminist and LGBTQ squatting in Brixton. My aim was not to present grand, exhaustive and conclusive narratives of particular collectives and spaces. There are no such singular stories to be told. Further, in documenting the spaces, histories, dynamics, political lineages and struggles this thesis has engaged, I did not seek – or at least did not only seek – to provide less exclusionary or more comprehensive accounts of squatting. What I *did* seek to do, in telling different stories to those commonly told about squatting in England, was to explore the political possibilities that might open up when we tell stories about political projects differently. In doing this, my aim was not – or, at least, not simply – to present histories to *learn* from, necessarily; not in any prescriptive manner. My aim – my hope – in drawing together these methods, geographies and archives was to enliven and mobilise the histories, spaces, identifications, terms, politics and projects explored in the preceding pages, and in doing so to perhaps open up possibilities in the here and now. I sought to approach the histories, spaces, identifications, terms, politics and projects explored in the preceding pages as valuable resources to denaturalise the past, to imagine other ways to live in the present so that we might be able to formulate more emancipatory futures. I will leave it to the reader to decide if this project has been successful in that regard.

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